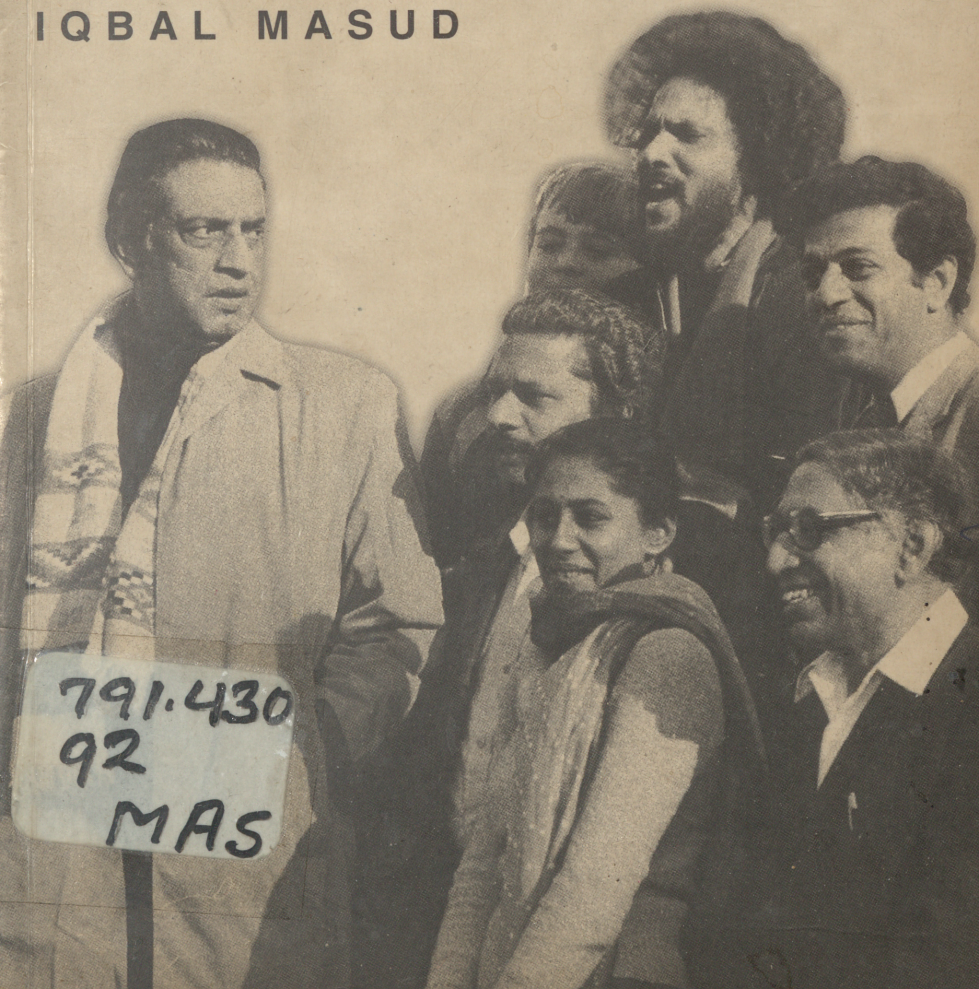
Dream Merchants, Politicians & Partition

MEMOIRS OF AN INDIAN MUSLIM

IQBAL MASUD



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MEMOIRS OF AN INDIAN MUSLIM

IQBAL MASUD

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With a Foreword by
Vinod Mehta

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Sunle Tu Dil Ki Sada

(Song from the film
Tere Ghar Ke Samne)

To Ghousunnisa Begum
and
Asgari

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Foreword

Iqbal Masud was part of my luck in the mid-Seventies. Desperate to give some semblance of respectability to the girlie *Debonair* — Atal Behari Vajpayee liked the magazine but confessed he kept it under his pillow — I was darting around for 'writers' to divert attention from the appalling nudes obtained, admittedly, at appallingly low prices. Anil Dharker mentioned an income tax officer who actually read books besides official gazettes and had a 'keen interest in the cinema'. It seemed an unlikely story but my desperation for getting the magazine out from under the pillow had by now reached crisis point. Thus was born Iqbal Masud the film critic. He has not looked back since.

I can claim some vantage point in writing about Iqbal since my career as an editor and his career as a critic-writer began at roughly the same time. For the past two decades and more we have been friends, and in most of the publications I have fleetingly edited he has been a distinguished contributor. A few months ago I remember visiting him in his Churchgate flat. Recovering from an illness, he sat in an almost bare room surrounded by papers, book and pills of many colours. The sole object in the room was a rusty television set. Pointing to the contraption, he said, 'This is my window to the world.'

We parted with my exhortation that he quickly finish this book.

Although his intellectual and critical gaze falls on multiple areas, Iqbal Masud is first and foremost a commentator on popular Indian culture. This, of course, is a crowded field with at least a handful of individuals worthy of mention in despatches. The author of this memoir, however, is unique because he brings to popular culture a refreshingly fresh and exciting vision. With all the seriousness at his command he tells his readers that Shammi Kapoor's loud 'Yahoo' is as important as Satyajit Ray's superbly crafted exposure of decadent Muslim aristocracy in *Shatranj ke Khiladi*.

Iqbal recognised early on that despite the urgings of 'responsible citizens' people like to consume triviality in rather huge quantities. For a critic, then, to ignore or neglect or patronise or vilify triviality in popular culture was an abdication of responsibility. Worsé: you were missing something crucial.

In the late Seventies, I had the opportunity to watch Iqbal Masud at work. An afternoon paper invited me to review Hindi films and in a spirit of reckless masochism I accepted the assignment. Every Wednesday in a back-alley of Colaba a dozen or so would collect in the evening to devour the weekly offering from Bollywood. I found it an ordeal to make it to the end and after the interval 'snakes' break (invariably, one cold samosa, one over-sweet pastry and two soggy sandwiches). I would sneak out, guilty but enormously relieved. As was to be expected, my reviews were flippant, casual and trite. More importantly, they betrayed an attitude too common among purveyors of culture: the arbitrary division

between the serious and the commercial — the former to be extolled, the latter to be mocked.

Iqbal would sit through the entire film taking copious notes, collecting stills, talking to the distributor and, if necessary, communicating with those involved in the making of the film. All this he did with a quiet sobriety and understated earnestness. Not surprisingly, his weekly column was a model. He is the only film-reviewer I know who can begin an assessment of a Sridevi film with a quote from Evelyn Waugh and still make an awful lot of sense. Whether it was on the big screen or on television or on the stage or in fiction, Iqbal saw popular culture as an illumination of contemporary Indian reality. The Bombay film producer may be vulgar, greedy, crass, but he understands what moves and enthuses the vast masses at a given point of time. The producer's vision is probably transient and banal, but it is valid at the time of its creation. No one who claims to understand the dynamics of our society can do without such knowledge. Iqbal Masud's role in emphasising the larger significance of popular culture is, to my mind, pioneering. He is not merely a critic who goes to, say, a restaurant, consumes a meal, asks for the finger-bowl, wipes his hands and then pronounces a verdict. Good, bad, so-so. That genre of fast-food reviewing Iqbal generally avoided not only because it was ridiculously monotonous to churn out, but it had a vital component missing, namely context. Iqbal, like E M Forster, tried to 'connect'. As a result the interpretation of popular culture in his hands acquires a rare import: he helps us see the excesses, the lack of taste, style and substance in popular culture not simply as perversions of its rapacious authors but as part of a larger and

disturbing reality. Bollywood, suggests Iqbal, did not arrive from Mars; it is to a large extent our handiwork — and we should take responsibility for it.

Let me give one instance of the connection Iqbal had the wit and intelligence to make. We have all seen Guru Dutt's *Pyaasa* and admired its lyricism, its melancholic strain, its haunting music and its ideology-loaded lyrics. Most critics duly noted and applauded these aspects of the film and few denounced its clawing sentimentality. Iqbal went further. He maintained that *Pyaasa* (made in the late Fifties) was the first manifestation of disillusionment with the Indian republic. The bogusness of the 'tryst with destiny', the promises to create a just and free society, sham socialism, etc., were poignantly mirrored in a film (*Jinhe naaz he Hind per woh kahan hain?*) which ends with the idealist-hero seeking exile in a distant but better land. How many of us who saw the film made this connection? Today, of course, Guru Dutt is something of a cult figure — a film-maker ahead of his time — for which status Iqbal must take large credit.

In the mid-Eighties I watched Iqbal Masud become the most sought after critic in India. He was courted equally by Satyajit Ray and Prakash Mehra. Editors fought over him seeking exclusivity. His name constituted the marque for many publications. I remember an unctuous Bollywood producer asking me if there was any way (brown envelope?) to get a 'favourable' review out of Iqbal. 'Make a good film,' I suggested.

Besides culture, politics is Iqbal's other passion. When I first got to know him he was, loosely speaking, a left-wing liberal much exercised over American and Israeli perfidy in

the Middle East. (He spotted Edward Said before the Palestinian writer became fashionable.) Alas, the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* became a watershed in his intellectual and personal life. Iqbal was dismayed when his Hindu and (some) Muslim friends, despite knowledge of the contents, launched a campaign to ensure the novel was distributed in India. He was even more dismayed when the same friends accused him of encouraging and endorsing 'censorship' when he campaigned to get the book banned. Pushed, Iqbal's position on Rushdie's 'gratuitously offensive' novel hardened further and, if memory serves me right, he came close to defending Khomeini's *fatwa*. These were not easy times for those who admired and knew Iqbal and I spent many hours in Bombay with agitated friends dissecting and diagnosing the 'new' Iqbal Masud.

And then in December 1992 the citadel of cosmopolitanism, Bombay, witnessed the Shiv Sena led communal riots. With the police a spectator and sometimes an accomplice in the barbaric massacres, and the liberals impotent, Iqbal moved definitively away from liberal politics. Indeed, he saw Hindu and Muslim liberals not only as irrelevant but hypocritical. All talk, no action. If Muslims in India wanted to survive and prosper they had to become at once independent and vigilant. To expect protection from political parties or the state or sympathisers was suicidal folly.

Soon Iqbal assumed a new avatar — the Muslim Leader in Bombay counselling and advising his less fortunate 'brothers and sisters' to shun Hindu and Muslim well-wishers and guard against weakening the community by alien ideas of modernism. It was not a role he was comfortable in, as he

once confessed. 'Nobody wants to talk politics with me, I am Bombay's Shahabuddin,' he said jokingly.

When the Shiv Sena came to power in Maharashtra, Iqbal surprisingly welcomed the arrival. He told me Muslims would feel safer governed by Bal Thackeray than by Sharad Pawar — at least they knew who precisely Thackeray was. I was then living in Delhi but a mutual acquaintance told me Iqbal was now 'beyond the pale'. He use the dreaded word 'fundamentalist'.

I must confess that I am not entirely comfortable with the new Iqbal Masud. I prefer the old one. But I can understand the profound effect of the successive traumas inflicted on him — first Rushdie's profane novel, then Bombay's gruesome communal riots and finally the democratic election of the fascist Shiv Sena. And many of his 'fundamentalist' positions — for instance, insisting that implementing a uniform civil code or tampering with Muslim Personal Law were time bombs for the community — are currently accepted as self-evident truths. Which liberal would deny that changes in these sensitive areas are best left to the community to throw up and not imposed from outside?

Politics be damned. The Iqbal Masud I cherish is the one who manages in a 700-word film review to combine Godard, Mrinal Sen, Indira Gandhi and Madhuri Dixit — beginning naturally, with a few lines from Auden.

Vinod Mehta

Preface

These are memoirs, not a chronicle of life and times, or even an autobiography. Various themes cross and recross this episodic recall which extends from the mid-Thirties to early Nineties. There is the Khilafat background of my mother, my breaking away to 'Leftism' in the Forties; the great debate between the Left and the Right about the Second World War in the Forties; the even greater debate about the country's division — the Partition. Moving on to my 'opting' for India; my entry into bureaucracy in 1947; my growing obsession with cinema; the golden age of cinema — the Fifties; my posting to the Middle East in the UN — probably the sole first hand account of working in the Middle East by a middle-grade administrative level foreigner; the dark night of the Emergency; Calcutta and the golden joys — Ray, Mrinal Sen and the rest; the world of New Cinema; the media 'underworld' in Eighties-Nineties; and finally the Bombay genocide of 1993. All these events and incidents have gone into the making of my life and it is them that I ruminate over, discuss and put forward in these memoirs.

My real name is F G Jilani. *Iqbal Masud* was adopted for various administrative and self-preservatory reasons (the Emergency).

Why *Iqbal Masud*? Iqbal is my favourite poet. *Masud* is my *urf* — the name by which my family and close friends know me.

I *The Thirties*

SULOCHANA'S arms were around Billimoria, who lay over her. She put a small rope round Billimoria's neck and pulled his face towards hers. I didn't quite understand what was happening. I leaned forward in my seat to get a closer look. At this point, my aunt's hand clamped down over my eyes. I shall never know till the end of time what Billimoria and Sulochana did later.

This was in the early Thirties. I was eight years old, seated between my *burqa* clad mother, Ghousunnisa Begum and my aunt, in the balcony in a Cuddapah theatre. Mother was a Khilafat activist in the movement against the British led by Gandhiji and the Muslim leaders called the Ali brothers. She would address an audience of thousands of *burqa* clad women. Father was a senior officer in the education department under the British. Why Mother was not arrested or my father not dismissed is difficult to explain today. This was one of the many contradictions of British imperialism. Father refused to accompany Mother to the cinema theatre, as he was against the custom of wearing the *burqa*. So she took me along as a male escort. Her one passion after Khilafat was Indian cinema.

The days of escorting mother, however, soon came to an

end. Talkies came and I began to go to theatres with my cousin Shoukat. In 1937 we went to see the New Theatre's film *Vidyapati* in Mangalore. We were bowled over. We returned at nine p.m. and discussed the film till one a.m.

Vidyapati was not only my first film, it also marked the beginning of my interest in film appreciation. The reason why *Vidyapati* made such a powerful impression on us was because it was a huge dose of the 'other culture' — the Hindu culture. It fascinated us because we belonged to the stern puritanism of Islam represented by Mother. *Vidyapati* showed us that another, equally powerful world existed outside Islam. Years later, I mentioned this to Satyajit Ray. 'A rotten film,' he said. For him as a philosophical Hindu in the broadest sense, the 'Hinduism' of *Vidyapati* was crude alphabet. For me, becoming aware for the first time of adult intimacies, it was a marvellous window into another tantalizing new world. The king, played by Prithviraj Kapoor, was madly in love with his queen. He was not interested in defending his kingdom against the enemy. 'The enemy has a point,' he said, 'Let him take the territory which belongs to him'. The queen, however, was in love with poet Vidyapati, played by Pahadi Sanyal, who had a devotional centre far away from the capital. As if the plot was not thick enough, it transpired that one of Vidyapati's disciples, Anuradha, played by Kanan Devi, was also besotted by the poet. So, when he went to the capital at the king's invitation, Anuradha forced him to take her along as well. In the capital, a peculiar kind of quadrangular love affair developed. There was only one complication: Vidyapati, himself, was in love with God — see what I mean by a glittering load of Hindu culture?

Anuradha captivated our adolescent hearts. When she sang, *'Jane na doongi, jane na doongi, rath ke neeche sar paar karoongi, lete rahoongi, rah mein,'* (I shall not let you go. I shall lie down beneath your chariot). I didn't quite understand what she was doing. But it took my breath away. When she garlanded Vidyapati, he said, *'Anuradha, yeh tumne kya kiya, mere gale mein haar dal diya!'* (Anuradha, what have you done? You have garlanded me). This became a cult line for me. After two decades it became a party line. When I met a charming documentary film maker called Anuradha at the Bombay Documentary Festival in the 90s, I repeated the line. To my utter surprise, she smiled and said, 'My uncle says that to me.' Behind the jocularity there was real fascination. At the king's capital, Anuradha mocked a courtier, *'Mere angana mein aye aali, main chaal chalun matwali ... choli pe nazariye jaye,'* (My lover comes into the garden, I walk drunkenly ... He looks at my bodice). Both, the courtier in the film and audience gasped. Recently, I quoted this in a TV debate on the film *Khalnayak*'s: *'Choli ke peeche kya hai,'* (What is there behind the bodice), the controversial song of the present decade.

The cultural awakening set off by *Vidyapati* was followed by V Shantaram's *Duniya Na Mane* and *Aadmi* (1939). I loved *Aadmi's* famous song, *'Kis liye kal ki baat,'* (Why talk of tomorrow?). The implicit hedonism in all these films made me a 'traitor' to the puritanism of my mother, which despite everything never quite lost its hold. Now as I look back, I realise my intellect has faced a conflict between two culturally divergent positions.

My mother exerted a great influence on my Muslim

identity. She was, so to speak, the embodiment of Islamic puritanism. But, to be fair to her, I must define her position. She was a Faruqi, descendant of the tribe of the second Caliph of Islam in seventh century AD, Hazrat Umar Faruq. Under him, Islam flourished and within decades its influence extended from Spain in Europe, to Sind in India. Mother was very proud of her heritage. In quarrels with father over domestic matters she would in a fit of pique and pride, declaim, *'Zinda hain to zinda aalam ko dikha denge/Hum Satwat-i-Faruqi duniya ko dikha denge,'* (I shall show the splendour of the Faruqis to the world).

But there was a chink in her crusading armour. Her father, Abdul Karim Faruqi, had served the British so faithfully that he was made Inspector General of Police in Madras in 1917. He was also awarded the title of Khan Bahadur. I remember him in his huge house in Saidapet, Madras. When he walked down Madras Central station platform, smoking a *hooka*, a policeman would follow a dozen feet behind carrying the *hooka*. There was a photo in my house showing Khan Bahadur Abdul Karim Khan in all his uniformed glory. Mother was proud, yet at the same time ashamed of her father. A Faruqi in the service of the British! But she always found excuses for him. 'Your grandfather never went to the British Inspector General's house because he had a dog called Tipu. He never attended the Victory Ball in 1917-18 celebrating victory over the Turkish Caliphate'.

I too, was slightly ashamed of my grandfather and never spoke of him at the Madras Christian College during the Leftist Forties. Today, I feel differently. To refuse to go to the boss's house because he had a dog called Tipu and not to

attend the Victory Ball in 1917 was nothing short of heroic. How many senior bureaucrats today would register silent protest against our imperialist centralist policy in Kashmir, Punjab, the North-East or towards the LTTE?

There was another side to my mother's culture apart from that of family history and honour, and this was the creative side. She was a writer. Recently I read Mukul Kesavan's novel *Looking Through Glass* in which he creates a Muslim family in the Forties to prove how secular or 'normal' the Muslims were. He describes a Hindu falling in love with the Muslim culture via the poetry of Hali and marrying into the family. I called up Mukul when I read this, 'Mukul, this is all theory. One day, I will write down the reality.' That is what I am doing now.

Mother and Aunt, father's sister, were Urdu writers. They were among the few Urdu writers in South India in the Twenties and Thirties. Their articles were published in Lahore's women's magazines like *Tehzib Niswan* and *Ismat*. There was only one other Urdu writer in the South. She was a Collector's daughter, Hijab Ismail. She married Imtiaz Ali Taj — editor of some of the noteworthy publications, and emigrated to Lahore. I heard her, decades later during the 1965 war, when she attacked India over Lahore Radio. The articles written by my mother, aunt and Ismail were 'reformatory', i.e. they sought to improve the position of Muslim women within the framework of Islam.

When I was five, I was taught Arabic, began reading the Quran and was instructed to pray five times a day. By the age of seven, I fasted during Ramzan. The message conveyed by my mother over the next five years was that in Islam one must

be a hero. 'Look at our Holy Prophet suffering in Mecca. He had to "flee" *(Hijrat)* to Madina. A number of heroes grew up around him and he captured Mecca and destroyed the idols,' she said. I was overwhelmed by the drama of Islamic heroism conjured up by her. She talked of the *Khalifas* (Caliphs) who came after the Prophet — Hazarats Abubakar, Omar Faruq, Ali, Uthman. She talked of great generals like Khalid Bin Waliad, Amr Ibnal, Aas, the conqueror of Egypt. She would tell me stories of their courage and enterprise, 'They had rushed across North Africa, till they were stopped by the Atlantic beyond Morocco. The Arab commander said: "By God, if I had not been stopped by the sea, I would have continued to the end of the earth" '. At this point, her face would glow and she quoted Iqbal, *'Dasht to dasht, dariya bhi na chodi humne/bahre zulmat mein dauda diye ghode humne'*. (What are deserts? We plunged our horses into the Sea of Darkness [The Atlantic Ocean]).

Mother and Iqbal were the reasons why I never became a Salman Rushdie. Rushdie and I, both read the Quran and were instructed in the important *hadith* (traditions) at the same age. He became a mocker of early Islam and I, a fervent admirer.

But I knew I would never become a hero like Khalid or the great North African generals.

Mother sent me to the Municipal Mohammedan Middle School in Cuddapah. She refused to admit me into a convent, as my father had wanted. My classmates were children of *jhatkawallahs* (horse carriage drivers) and butchers. They laughed at education. They mocked the name of the school calling it 'Mya, Mya, Mya School'. Still one learnt Arabic. The

Farsi classes were a disaster. For one year the teacher repeated the same line of Saadi: '*Karima ba bakhshai barhal ma.*' (Lord, have compassion on my condition). The boys had fun at the teacher's expense. When he asked us to repeat the line, we would roar in nonsense Deccani. It made no difference to the teacher because he never understood what we said. But my Persian, as a result of all this, suffered an early blow from which it never recovered.

The Urdu teacher was excellent. He was pan-Islamist like my mother. When he came to Iqbal's '*Saqiliyya*' (Sicily), an ode to the Arabs who occupied the city in the early Middle Ages, '*Mujhse apna dard ka, main bhi sarapa dard hoon/jis ki tu manzil tha, main us karwan ki gard hoon*', (Tell me your pain for I am pain itself/I am the dust of that caravan of which you were the destination) Mr Qasim would weep, hands over his face. We too would weep with him for an island we would never see. Every morning in the middle school, we would sing: '*Ai khasai khasan-i-rusul waqt dua hai; qummat pe teri aake ajab waqt pada hai; jo din badi shaan se nikla tha watan se; pardes mein woh aaj garibul guraba hai*' (O chosen of the Prophets, this is a time for prayer; the faith which started so gloriously from its homeland is the dust of the dust in a foreign land). That kind of daily prayer repeated over three years leaves its mark on one's mind. Sixty years later I remember those words and the fervent tone of singing as clearly as if I heard it yesterday.

I gradually began to drift away from this fervour when I changed schools because of my father's transfer. I became aware that the Khilafat in Turkey had been abolished by Mustafa Kamal in 1921. I began to argue with mother. 'How

can you believe in Khilafat any longer, mother? See what Mustafa Kamal has done'. Mother would say, 'What has he done? *Usne Islam ka tibta bacha liya hai! Magar Islam to Maraakash Se Java tak phaila hua hai'* (He has saved a small area of Islam. But Islam spreads from Morocco to Java). This sentiment is voiced by Islamic radicals even today.

II *The Forties*

THE Forties for me actually began in the year 1937 at the Madras Christian College, Tambaran when I reached the Intermediate Class. From 1930 to 1947, I was at the Christian College, first as a student and then as a lecturer. All the three themes of this account — an Indian Muslim growing up in pre-Partition India, my involvement in literature and cinema, and my role as a potential Brown Saheb have their seed in this period.

It was true then and it is true now that Hindus and Muslims (particularly the Urdu speaking ones) did not really 'know' each other. Of course, there are cultural differences among non-Muslims too. But these differences are of degree and not of kind. In early 1996, Shahabuddin, the Janata Dal MP of Babri Masjid fame, visited me for the first time. Having often criticised him in print I found it difficult to maintain the hostility when I met him. He no longer seemed a 'satanic' figure to me. There is one point which he raised, with which I found it difficult to disagree. 'Whatever you may say, Masud Saheb, don't forget our religious and cultural foundation extends beyond India to the Middle East. We are the only religious minority of which this is true and this offends the nationalism of the most liberal Hindu'. The truth of this

can you believe in Khilafat ?
Mustafa K[illegible] decried or dismissed. Instead of ignoring it, we should ask why, when a communist like Ali Sardar Jafri laments the genocide of 1993, he does it in terms of *Karbala* an event totally non-Indian, far away and long ago.

In the Forties, I was 'exposed' to the non-Muslims when I joined one of the three hostels in the Christian College — St. Thomas's (the other two being Bishop Heber and Selsiyur). Founded in the 1830s, this college has become an educational symbol of modern India like other institutions of its kind in Bombay, Calcutta and Lahore. It had long ceased to be Christian in the strictest sense of the word. It was a huge cosmopolitan affair. Exposed to this ambience, my small-town Muslim upbringing was woefully inadequate. I think I made an exhibition of myself the first year. No one could really understand the religio-cultural elements which constituted my life.

Only one thing saved me — my passion for Greek and Roman history. They were compulsory subjects and I dived into them. They left an imprint on my life which has lasted till today. Greeks like Pericles, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle and the dramatists thrilled me. I was also fascinated by the Greek democratic city states, and today when I look at India I find the similarities astounding. India, which once was an ardent advocator of freedom has become an imperial power like Athens.

Roman history was an equally stimulating affair. The administration of democracy was built up and then destroyed. The one unforgettable line in Roman history occurs in Shakespeare's Julius Caeser: '*Et Tu, Brute?* Then fall Caesar'. Our inspired Roman history teacher read this and explained

how twin ideas of loyalty clashed here.

This total immersion in history showed its results in my examination. I stood first and got a copy of Shakespeare's works, and a four-year scholarship at the college. In short, I had been accorded recognition and entered the ranks of what was to become India's elite — the Westernised middle class.

My 'Muslim' origins were not forgotten. There was an excited patriot called R R Benjamin who used to shout, 'Iqbal, what is your Jinnah saying? What is your Pazlul Haq saying?' Benjamin was a great user of four-letter words. So sometimes the second name became 'Pazlul F'. It was totally unconscious and Benjamin stared at me when I choked with laughter.

I did not know anything about 'my' Jinnah or the others. I wished they would go away and leave me in peace with the Greek philosophers and dramatists. But I was compelled to investigate. Gradually, I found out what was happening and connected it with my mother's pan-Islamism. From the start, I saw Muslim separatism in its historical context and not as a fanatic foray. I found people listened when I talked in this fashion. What is happening today was happening around me in my college in the Thirties and Forties in a pristine state. There were only two Muslims in the college who could write or speak about Muslim separatism. A boy called Sikandar Pasha and myself. Pasha was the son of the leader of Madras Muslim League. To overcome that 'stigma' in college, he became a pronounced 'nationalist'. He would attack Jinnah at every possible opportunity. People would ask me why I was not like Pasha? I would try to explain that Pasha was a hypocrite and was fooling them, but no one would listen. At

one big meeting he attacked Jinnah so bitterly that I got up and left the meeting. It was the first and last occasion I did something like that. I found people still remembered it many years later.

At this point, I shall recapitulate and go back to the Thirties. The drama of pan-Islamism collapsed when my father was transferred to Anantpur, Andhra Pradesh in 1934. The Anantpur Municipal Middle School was a dull affair. I was the only Muslim in the class. My English was abysmal. The teacher asked us to write an essay on the place of our birth. I wrote 'Nellore has many cattle'. I found I could not do any better than this. This drew laughter and mockery in the class. It did not upset me too much, but I resolved to learn English. My father's office (he was the DEO, District Educational Officer) had an excellent library. I began by reading Macaulay. My Muslim friends mocked me. *'Macaulay, Macaulay, Macaulay/Main padtha hoon tujko tu mujhko bulalay'* (Macaulay, Macaulay, Macaulay/I read you, you send for me). I ignored them. I fell in love with the Lays of Ancient Rome.

Gradually, I turned away from Urdu and pan-Islamism. In the next district — Salem, I won a prize for my essay on 'Minor Prophets in the Bible' at the London Mission School.

After Salem (1935), my life changed. It was taken over by my uncle — father's brother — Abdul Ghani. Ghani was a Khilafat fighter like mother. The difference was he had been jailed as a very young man in the Twenties. His education had been disrupted. When he came out of jail he was still an idealist, but rather bitter. He got a job in Port Trust, Waltair, now called Visakhapatnam.

Uncle Ghani sparked off in me a passion for English that was intense. I was so bored in Waltair away from my parents that I spent most of the time in my uncle's library. I ploughed through a popular edition of *The Encyclopaedia Brittanica*. A huge number of odd facts were permanently implanted in my mind, a legacy I carried with me when I went to Madras Christian College in 1937.

An important figure in my college life was Mr Fossil, a nationalist Muslim when it was extremely dangerous to be one, during the late Thirties upto 1947. He was close to C Rajagopalachari, last Governor-General of India and later Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, and to T T Krishnamachari, later Union Finance Minister. Mr Fossil was a congenital speaker. In the Forties, Jagathpathi (later Secretary to Arjun Singh in Madhya Pradesh) and C B Motaiya, a communist used to invite him to Christian College to speak at the left meetings. Jagath was fond of Fossil but found him farcical. An extract about him in 'Charivaria' of *Punch* read, 'Mr Fossil also spoke (the Hindu). In India even Fossils speak'. This page was given to Fossil. He enjoyed it so much that he kept the cutting in his purse. When among friends he used to take the cutting out and say 'See, I am in the *Punch*'. This was the ambience that surrounded Pasha and me during these years.

When Partition came, Pasha left for Pakistan and became a very important member of Pakistan's diplomatic service. Only a few of the college students knew this. One of them was C B Motaiya, by now a prominent advocate in Bangalore, who told me when I started this book, 'Pasha fooled us alright'. I mention this to point out a familiar phenomenon. A Muslim separates himself from the common, ordinary

Muslims and sets himself into a category called a 'nationalist progressive-radical-Muslim.' The majority clutches at the 'exceptional' Muslim and makes him a hero. 'Why are you not like him, Iqbal?' was a question I was often asked in the Forties. I am asked the same question today substituting a modern progressive for Pasha. I laugh and tell myself that this is one of the few benefits of a long life. You see the permanence of a historical joke.

In those days a Bachelor's degree was regarded an elite course. Only first class 'Inter' students were admitted. When I joined BA Hons., I was, so to speak, separated from the common stream. My classmates were exceptional and they remained exceptional in independent India: I shall mention four of them.

Dr Raja Ramanna, later India's leading atomic scientist, was my contemporary at Madras Christian College in the early Forties. He was regarded as a genius even then and could have made his mark in any of the three fields of literature, music or science. Though I knew him I wish I could say he was a close friend. But Ramanna even then was incapable of 'close friendship'. When I talked to him I was reminded of Queen Victoria's remarks about Gladstone: 'He addresses me as if I were a public meeting'. Ramanna was not so crude but I noticed when talking to him that if people gathered around us, and they usually did because Ramanna always talked about fascinating subjects, his manner changed. It is difficult to describe this, but somehow it became a public address.

However, there was another genius whose interests and enthusiasms I shared. This was G Jagathpathi, an outstanding Economics student, who later had a notable career in the IAS

and was also Arjun Singh's chief secretary in Madhya Pradesh. Jagathpathi was then a Marxist. He had, by the Forties gone deep into theory and was into criticism of the Marxist revisionists. He went to Prodattur in Cudappah district (AP) to campaign for the Communist Party. This was noted by the police and used against him in 1947 when he qualified in the first batch of the IAS. Sardar Patel, then Home Minister, called him and asked him to make up his mind, 'You want to be a communist or an IAS administrator?' Jagathpathi opted for the IAS but remained an 'administrative guerilla' — at least till the late Fifties. The third notable friend was C B Motaiya, a stalwart communist. I first encountered him in a situation typical for him. Friends were displaying his back which was covered with scars. A close relative had died in Coorg and Motaiya had been asked to shave his head. He refused on principle and was beaten up. For me Motaiya's back has remained a symbol of exceptional secularism. When I look at 'secularists' today, I laugh and ask a silent question: 'Has your back ever been scarred in the name of secularism?'

Another friend was Kanakadurga, one of the loveliest women I have known in my life. Durga came to class each morning in a bullock cart accompanied by her father, who returned at five in the evening to pick her up. Durga was the offspring of a mixed marriage — Brahmin father, non-Brahmin mother. They were zealous theosophists, followers of J D Krishnamurthy. My friendship with Durga was something I have always treasured. She was supposed to be a scholar of Hinduism. But I found in her a contempt for religion. She was full of the 'Master' and the 'World Spirit'. Today, at seventy-five, she has remained faithful to her college beliefs.

Perhaps Durga's obsessive concern for J D Krishnamurthy made me instinctively turn against him in my later life.

These friends did not share my other areas of enthusiasm — European literature and Hindi cinema. Jagathpathi's radicalism commenced from 1917 but mine went back to 1789 to Robespierre and the Jacobins. I devoured Carlyle's *French Revolution* at the age of seventeen. Carlyle had called Robespierre 'The sea green incorruptible'. My reservation towards today's mainstream communists and my secret admiration for the genuine Naxalite stems from Carlyle. In the 1980s I watched Wajda's *Danton* at the Bombay International Film Festival. I felt physically sick at Wajda's caricature of Robespierre and gave vent to my contempt for the film next day in a TV interview surprising many in the audience by my fury.

E M Forster was discovered soon after. As I read *Passage to India*, I told myself, 'Dr Aziz is me'. I read every word of Forster I could lay my hands on. Two institutions helped me in fulfilling my voracious appetite for European literature. One was the Connemare Public Library in Madras where I discovered T S Eliot's *The Waste Land* in the original Criterion issue of the early Twenties. The second institution was the second-hand book section of Madras Moore Market where I discovered Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Christopher Isherwood — *Goodbye to Berlin* and *Mr Norris Changes Trains*. The latter inspired Fosses's film *Cabaret* (1972) decades later. Another book I read then, which has left an indelible mark on my mind, as much as Eliot and Carlyle is Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist As A Young Man*.

These discoveries went hand in hand with my continued

infatuation with Hindi cinema. The consummation of this infatuation took place weekly in a theatre called Star, Triplicane, Madras, the only theatre in the city to show Hindi films. I travelled from Tambaram to the city, a distance of twenty miles. Over the weekend, I saw the films with another fanatic. We were stunned by Shantaram's *Admi*, Mehboob's *Aurat*, *Mother India*, and *Roti* which Kundan Shah, film director called a terrorist film when it was shown on TV in the Eighties. I watched *Kismat*, starring Ashok Kumar, with wondering amazement. It was Hindi cinema's first true comedy.

But the major historical event of the Forties was the 1942 movement. An event which has been falsified by writers and film directors as diverse as Arun Shourie and Vidhu Vinod Chopra. It is the most misrepresented event in Indian history and I take the liberty of saying so because I was fully involved in it. The event was distorted by Arun Shourie in the Eighties, aided and abetted by Pritish Nandy of *The Illustrated Weekly*. Both lacked a sense of the past. Then there was the film *1942, A Love Story* by Vidhu Vinod Chopra — a distortion of Indian history unequalled in cinema history. I do not claim that my account is an answer to Shourie and Chopra. I am merely setting down my recollections of 1942 in Madras Christian College where the battle was fought as intensely as anywhere else. Basically, as I said in my review of the Chopra film, 1942 was not the year of a love story but the year of the Great Debate — the first of the great historical debates in urban India which continues till today.

In 1942 the debate was between ideologues who saw life and history not as 'Indians' but as citizens of the world and

those who saw them as 'Indians'. About the latter we felt, to borrow a phrase from an English commentator of the Forties: 'What do they know of India who only India know'.

Despite all the atrocities committed by the Western democracies upto and during this decade, they were preferable, from the leftist point of view (with which I identified), to the naked fascism of the Germans and the Japanese. Today I feel, we, the leftists were right in 1942. Though we were ignorant, at that time, of the horrors committed by Stalin inside Russia. My personal reasoning went like this: After the blows inflicted by the Japanese on the British in the Far East in 1942, the British Empire was finished. But its death throes would take some time. This fact was clear in 1942 though the Quit India Movement people ignored it. The real issue was: What would happen after the inevitable departure of the British? Would India be taken over by the rising capitalist class which was already showing its ruthlessness — witness the huge black money earned by this class in the war effort. The Bengal famine of 1943 could not be attributed solely to the British. This class too was responsible for the disaster. Therefore, the need of the hour was to prevent this class from coming into power after the British departure. This is what the communists were really fighting for behind all their talk of 'People's War'. The communists, poor communicators then as now, could not get this historical truth across to the masses, who fell for the facile patriotism of '*Karenge Ya Marenge*'. This was the crux of the matter falsified by Shourie and Chopra.

In 1942, the students were divided into two sections. The leftists and the Congress group. We, the leftists invited Mohan Kumaramangalam to the Christian College in 1942.

Mohan was then a young communist, just back from Oxford. I remember receiving him at the Tambaram station. Mohan got down with his 'bedding', refused the offer of a coolie and began walking with us with the bedding on his shoulder. In 1942-43, this was something memorable. Later, we entered the college hall. The atmosphere was hostile. I was seated with Motaiya, Jagathpathi and other friends on the platform. Mohan got up, took the mike and began, 'Comrades....' But he was not allowed to go further. A student Congress leader who later became a Union Minister, jumped on to the platform and seized the mike from Mohan. He began to shout, 'Friends, don't listen to these traitors. They frighten us by talking about Japanese invasion. I say let them come. Whom will they destroy? The British empire, not us, "*Karenge Ya Marenge*" '. A section of the audience roared with him. It was an exhibition of total fascism. The meeting was disrupted. On the way back to the station, Jagathpathi apologised to Mohan. Mohan laughed, 'I am used to this back in England'. Mohan was one of the few leaders I admired in those years. Despite his later flirtation with Indira Gandhism, he remained a true communist. The tragedy of Indian Communism today is that it has no one remotely like Mohan.

If 1942 was the year of the Great Debate, 1943 was the year of personal failure. These memoirs are a combination of historical and personal events. When you enter the personal arena, you enter an uncertain world. That is why most memoirs avoid the strictly personal. No autobiographical work can be totally truthful in the sense of complete self-disclosure. It is the area between partial, selective disclosure and full disclosure that is 'exploited' by most memoirists.

Finally, what is disclosed is a matter of personal taste. In fact, it is a matter of one's personality. In my own case, the disclosure of personality has certainly been partial. It does not mean that it is not self-critical or uncritical of others. It is the partiality of such disclosures that attracts (or repels) readers of memoirs.

Till 1943 I had generally been regarded as a 'success' in Madras Christian College despite my introverted and reserved nature. I was good at something — scoring high marks in examinations, and showing a degree of knowledge which did not disgrace me in the company of Raja Ramanna and Jagathpathi. This carefully built up persona was destroyed in 1943. The final BA Hons. examination was the supreme test of oneself. Raja Ramanna and Jagathpathi had got through their finals, establishing University records and now it was my turn. I was expected to stand first in History and Politics.

I remember well the summer of 1943. It is the season when flowers fall from those huge trees in Tambaram emanating a peculiar scent, and a dry crackle. That smell and crackle is, even today, bound up in my consciousness with failure. The final examination was in April, 1943. From January of that year, I began to develop a serious nervous fear which became obsessive as the examination approached. I had the option of withdrawing and appearing next year. But a host of brilliant friends, who had supreme confidence in my capacity told me, 'Iqbal, your fears are groundless. Take the exam and you will come first.' That is when I learnt never to take advice. But this knowledge came only after the disaster. Each day of the examination was wracked by thoughts of failure. One friend, Anwar, saw what was happening. On the night before

the examination on 'The Constitutional History of England', he came to my room and dragged me away from Bishop Stubbs' huge text on the subject. I was in such a nervous state that it did not occur to me to protest. Anwar took me to Madras city to an area called Walaja Road. I had known this area as a dull place of lower middle class Muslim respectability. But Anwar knew where to go. He took me to a *kotha*. I had read about such places in nineteenth-century novels like Mirza Ruswa's *Umrao Jaan* which purported to be the autobiography of a *kotha* girl.† The lady in charge of the *kotha* could not have been more than forty. But to a boy of eighteen, she appeared to be the Ancient of the Days. She called out 'Khanum! Jaanum!' Two girls entered the hall. I was transfixed by their appearance. Khanum sat before me, Jaanum before Anwar in the *kotha* posture. Khanum began singing in a high voice a song from *Umrao Jaan*: '*Phir nazar jhepti hai/Aankh jhuki jaati hai*' (Once again shyness overcomes her, she lowers her eyes). Then she desperately beat her little fists on her thighs and pointed to Jaanum: '*Dekhiye, dekhiye phir teer khata hota hai*' (Again the arrow misses the mark). Jaanum closed her eyes and bowed her head. It was heartstopping, it was enticing. *Kotha* singing is one of the few arts, which simultaneously possesses your mind and your heart.

Anwar took me away after two hours. I slept without touching Bishop Stubbs. The next day I gave my best answers in the examination. The result, however, was a disgraceful

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† This novel is a classic of Urdu literature being an emotional satirical account of a 'disreputable' Muslim woman.

third class. I was in Madurai in South India when the results were announced. My father was a senior education officer. He called his head clerk Jagadisan and told him to take me for a walk. Jagadisan was what we Muslims called a *pucca* Brahmin, a mindless phrase. We did not know what Brahminism was. People who looked and talked in a particular fashion were stereotyped and labelled as 'Brahmins'. But I liked Jagadisan as a person. He took me to his house, probably the first time he had taken a Muslim home. For me too, it was the first time. Jagdisan's daughter, an attractive girl came and chatted with me. She was in the final year of the High School and wanted to know what college life was like. I thought to myself how different Brahmins were from us. No Muslim girl would talk to a stranger. Afterwards, Jagadisan took me out to a local park. On the way, we passed by the local jail from which awful sounds emanated. There were sounds of beating and a voice shouted '*Sollu, Sollu*', (Tamil for 'say, tell'). A man was crying out in pain. I was shocked and asked Jagadisan. He said the police were extracting a confession from a criminal. 'But this is awful. Our law does not permit this'. 'Iqbal Saheb, that is what you were taught in college. Here unless these b.... are beaten, they will not tell the truth.' I heard the celebrated *Aakrosh* (film directed by Govind Nihalani in the Seventies) line decades before actor Amrish Puri uttered it.

I told Jagadisan, 'I don't feel like going to the park. Let's go to the lake'. Jagadisan was embarassed. 'Sir, you are depressed by your result. I don't feel safe taking you to a lake'. I stared at Jagadisan. What was he saying? Then I understood. Jagadisan thought that I would jump into the lake out of

despair. I thought this so funny that I began to laugh. I laughed so much that I had to sit down on the road.

Khanum and Jagadisan saved my life in 1943. After more than half a century, I send them this message of thanks.

III 1944

ABSOLUTE failure, like mine in 1943, breeds absolute freedom. After my disaster in the BA examination, I was freed of the many roles I was playing — of a Muslim, of a 'progressive', of a film-buff and so on. Of course, they were not really 'roles' but in my post-failure frame of mind, I thought of them as such. I decided to abandon 'what I was' to be something different.

What I did was to apply for a 'King's Commission', a Second Lieutenant's post in the Indian Army, which, of course, at that time was regarded as a mercenary British Army. Progressive poet Makhdoom Mohiuddin wrote, '*Vatan ke sipahee tu kaha ja raha hai*' (Soldier of the country, where are you going?). I brushed aside that question. I got a prompt reply from the Army asking me to appear for a test at Lonavala near Bombay.

Now this really was an adventure. I had never been outside what at that time was known as the Madras Presidency (Andhra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and parts of Kerala).

Lonavala was in every sense out of the world — my world. A dozen or so young men had come from all over India to this pleasant resort. The week-long test was conducted entirely by English officers. The sole exception was a gorgeous

Goan girl, who was the secretary to the examining board.

How do I describe the test that followed? Let me recall to the present-day readers the TV serial *Udaan* in which a woman recruit to the Indian Police Service is made to undergo various tests. When I watched that serial I realized that things haven't changed much since 1943. The climbing and jumping over walls, the somersaults were all there then, plus certain other ordeals not shown in *Udaan,* like crossing a river, hanging on to a rope. Never having gone through 'tests' of this kind at college, I went through all of then blunderingly now. An English Captain had watched me in wonderment. I learnt later that there were a lot of easier ways of doing these tests. The Captain asked me, 'Iqbal, where did you learn these ways?' 'Survival instinct, Captain'. The Captain stared at me, then burst into a roar of laughter. He had mistaken my perfectly literal reply for a joke. He guessed that I possessed a sense of humour unlike millions of my countrymen. I think that mistaken divination of the Captain was responsible for my selection. Why did I really opt for this kind of life? After more than half a century, I feel that some inadequacy which I sensed in myself was responsible for it. At that time I was reading both Scott Fitzgerald and Hemingway, to my mind literary rivals in which Hemingway emerged as a clear winner. Why did he win? Because, I felt Hemingway knew more about 'real' life since he had been in battle and survived death. In some remote unconscious manner I was trying to redress that imbalance in myself by going into the army.

My results in the physical tests were not good. The mental/intelligence tests began. We were asked to write an essay on the Goan secretary — another example of the British sense

of humour. I don't remember what I wrote. But I asked Das, another candidate, what he had written. Das was an exceptional character. He said and did the most unpredictable things. He remarked, 'I wrote that the secretary's upper half of the body is better than her lower'. Wonderful. I cursed myself for not having been so brief and telling. The final test was story writing. We were shown four stills and given four minutes to write a story about each. The fifth slide was a blank. We were asked to imagine a picture and write the story.

I asked Das what he had written about the blank. He said, 'Goethe's "Light, more light" '.

I don't know if Das was selected. But I was. I was asked to report to the OTS (Officers' Training School) in my home city, Bangalore. The OTC soon realised the blunder made by the Lonavala board in selecting me. But the six months they took to decide my fate were a trial decisive to my life. The first course was bayonet drill. How to use a bayonet to enter the entrails of another human being. How to make doubly sure that the enemy was really gored. A disgust and hatred for war was born in me in those two weeks. But I became a good 'bayonet man'. For the first time, I practised what the Shias call '*Taqia*' (hiding 'faith'). I successfully hid my true beliefs and played the role that the outside world wanted me to play. I used this for survival in later life too and got away with it. But somehow in the Army, my dissimulation was not successful. The basic reason why the Army threw me out was not merely poor performance but an ill-concealed dislike for the basic ethos of army life. For instance, I was surprisingly good at submachine guns. We had a Pathan instructor, Sergeant Akram Khan, who took an instant dislike to me. Once,

during his instruction, I lost interest in what he was saying and looked at a young woman walking by. Akram commented on how I was not married. After a few weeks of this, I complained about Akram to a supervisory board. This was an extraordinary thing to happen in 1944 in the British Indian Army. But I must say in fairness, the British listened to me patiently. They said, 'We wonder if you really like being with us. We know you have a superior education. But you have to rough it out'. Akram was shifted and a British Sergeant-Major came. He was ruder than Akram. But he was rude to everyone. I learnt a lot during those six months: how to tolerate things you don't like, how to get on with people you don't like. There were other trainee officers who rose to great heights in post-1947 India. Generally they didn't impress me much at the time. They toadied to the British, they laughed at them behind their backs. I had two happy moments. One was the discovery that I was a long-distance runner. Our platoon won the cross-country race from the other three platoons primarily because of the desperate run I made in the last lap. They celebrated that event and drank punch. For the first time I felt the British officers' approval of me. The second happy moment was when one English officer, Captain Wellman who seemed to like me arranged a debate on the English in India and attacked Macaulay for having anglicized Indian education. I stoutly defended Macaulay not merely for debating purposes but because I believed Macaulay was essentially right even though he was wrong in his contempt for Sanskrit and Persian. At the end of the debate, Wellman took me aside and said, 'Good show, Iqbal'. I knew that this was the highest compliment people like Wellman would bestow.

But finally, I had to go. Wellman came to my room the day before the termination order was served. 'Iqbal, I don't want you to go and be killed in Kohima where your platoon is going. That kind of fighting needs a very different kind of person. Further you don't really believe in this Army'.

Thus the army and I parted without any regrets. Those six months of training were crucial to my knowledge of the 'war' experience. Now, when I read the lines 'soldiers crawled under fire', I know exactly what it means and my heart goes out to the soldiers even though I could never be one of them.

A complex and complicated lesson, but at the end of which, I could say, 'I am better than you were, Scott Fitzgerald.'

IV *1945-1947*

YEARS of division and disaster, the most important years in Indian history. And yet how poorly they have been dealt with.

Khushwant Singh, Rajendra Singh Bedi and Krishan Chander are writers who come to mind. Humanists, leftists, who gave their humanist-leftist version of the Partition. They missed its basic reality. Saadat Hasan Manto was one of the few geniuses of Urdu literature, but his view of Partition too was limited. He had his own morality, believe it or not, and he tried to fit Partition into that. Of all the writers I have read, (admittedly, I haven't read many Hindi writers) I find Qurratulain Haider nearest the mark. In a series of brilliant novels commencing from *Mere Bhi Sanam Khane* (1947) to *Chandni Begum* (1993), Haider explored, in an unparalleled fashion, the Muslim 'separateness', self-assertion and its deep links to the Hindu culture. Haider is Urdu's greatest fiction writer but her work is wrought in a very special Urdu style — allusive, complex, Proustian. Even Urdu readers are unable to grasp its nuances. The result is that for the common non-Urdu reader, Haider's world is as closed as the world of Islam.

Coming to historical works we have of course, the recent works of Ayesha Jalal and Inderraj Singh. They are works of exceptional importance but they do not convey the subtle

nuances of the Partition. The result is the world of Partition has remained 'closed'. So when Govind Nihalani makes *Tamas* it is taken as a true picture of Partition. I was one of the few critics of *Tamas* (I have great regard for Bhisham Sahni's original novel) and I was much misunderstood. Anand Patwardhan, a leftist film maker said to me, 'You will be mistaken for a "reactionary" '. There is no possible answer to that kind of charge. Still, I was convinced then and am convinced now that Nihalani is a well-intentioned film maker whose work is brilliant but erratic. Nihalani told me before the making of *Tamas* that he was nine at the time of Partition in Karachi. He remembers a cow being chased by a Muslim with a knife. That incident implanted the essence of Partition in his mind and you can see a sophisticated elaboration of that basic action in the TV serial.

There was an elaborate discussion of *Tamas* at a breakfast with Rajiv Gandhi, then Prime Minister. He had invited TV critics — Anil Dharkar, Amita Malik and myself among others for a discussion of television. The subject of *Tamas* cropped up. Alyque Padamsi was there and so was Mani Shankar Aiyar, MP. Rajiv Gandhi asked me, 'What is your objection to *Tamas*? People should know today what Partition was like'. 'Certainly,' I replied. 'But Nihalani's is a very limited portrait which will convey wrong ideas to the people. After all, in this room only Alyque, myself and one or two others are old enough to have witnessed Partition. I do not think that their view of *Tamas* essentially differs from mine'. Mani Shankar Aiyar interjected. 'Iqbal writes reviews challenging the correctness of a serial. No one challenges the correctness of his reviews'.

'I am prepared to stand the challenge,' I replied.

It was decided that Ramesh Sharma should invite me and Nihalani to hold a discussion on TV. The idea was dropped because it was felt the discussion might become too hot to handle. I feel that that decision was a mistake. The positions of Nihalani and myself would have been clarified for the benefit of TV viewers. In this book I do not want to describe the Partition. I want to convey the reality of it as one Muslim — I, who in 1947 was asked to choose between India and Pakistan — a choice given to few who have written about the Partition. I chose India.

I first heard about the Partition immediately after the passing of the resolution by the Muslim League in 1940. My uncle (father's sister's husband), Abdul Jabbar, told me about it. I was about seventeen and he was about thirty. He was an Urdu teacher in a Bangalore convent school, popular among the 'Westernised' of all communities. He was not an ideologue but he liked status and money. It is for this reason he choose to go to Pakistan in 1947, where he found himself without any means. He claimed to be a refugee and was allotted some unfortunate evacuee's mill near Abbotabad. Uncle Jabbar gave it on lease and stayed on in Karachi doing other businesses. He was a good entrepreneur and earned a substantial amount in a few decades. But he was not happy. He found he was not 'accepted' in Karachi. The 'Bangaloreans' were not too many and they were not among the leading lights. When he died in the late Eighties, he was alone in a flat on the Grand Faisal Road. As I sat by his side I reflected: Uncle Jabbar could have made money even in Bangalore. He was a smart businessman. If he had died there

he would have had friends and relatives by his side. Here he was dying alone in an alien city. Uncle Jabbar's future was not visible to Indian Muslims in 1945-47.

Though the Muslim League resolution was passed in 1940, it was only in 1945-47 that a decisive change came over the Muslim mind. Indian historians have dismissed this happening. I am giving a young Muslim student's impressions. I had been appointed by Dr Malcolm Adiseshaiah, Head of History and Economic Department, Christian College (later a top official in UNESCO), as a History lecturer despite my poor result (third class) in the MA examination. I was given a house in the Christian College campus, Barnes Villa, to look after nine students. Here I talked about and discussed Pakistan. I was firmly with the Left though not of it. I did not think of migrating to Pakistan because all my friends, people with whom I talked, argued most of the day, were Hindus, most of them Brahmins like Jagathpathi. Still, there was no doubt that the idea of Partition was getting a hold on mass opinion. There were many complexities and ironies visible at ground level. Muslims in the then Madras Presidency belonged to two language groups — Deccani Muslims, who spoke Urdu with a Deccani flavour ('*Ankhiyan*' for '*Aankhein*', '*Nakko*' for '*Nahin*') and there were the Labbais, Tamil-speaking second or third generation converts, who were more numerous and more prosperous. The mass thrust towards Pakistan was led by the Deccanis. Among students, there was the Muslim Students Federation with whom the leftists maintained an empathetic relationship. The leftist line was self-determination for Muslims and Sikhs within a federation. So we were not received with hostility at the Muslim Federation meetings.

I used to go to the mass meetings at Walaja Mosque where orators from the Hyderabad state and North India gave rousing speeches. The Labbais gradually imposed their leadership on the local Muslim League. When a famous Baluchi orator Qazi Mohammad Esa, came to Walaja Mosque, Mohammad Ismail, president of the local Muslim League and a Labbai, welcomed him in English.

Shouts went up from the audience, '*Urdu mein bolo*' (speak in Urdu). Esa was furious. He said, 'My Urdu is not perfect. It is half Baluchi. What is important is a Muslim state'. This, however, had no effect. A division of the South Indian Muslims rose and left the meeting, and in a sense this attitude persists to this day. This resulted in a funny incident. The Muslim Federation decided to send a Labbai from the Madras Muslim League to the Lucknow convention of the All India Muslim League sometime during 1943-46. The leader's name was Abdul Malick. He spoke only in Tamil. The Deccanis decided to train him in speaking working Urdu and also sent a Deccani assistant with him. Mr Abdul Malick arrived at Lucknow. He had been told to expect the question, '*Aap ka naam kya hai?*' (What is your name?) and give a suitable reply. A sherwanied, Turkish-capped gentleman — a typical Lucknawvi, approached him on the platform and asked '*Aap ka isme sharief kya hai?*' ('What is your name?' in Persianised Urdu). Naturally Mr Malick was baffled. He turned to his Deccani assistant and asked in Tamil '*Ippo Sollu Isme Sharief?*' (Now tell me what is Isme Sharief?). This story which was a true incident assumed classical-cult proportions. It was known to all the Muslims of my generation in the South.

One of them Mohammad Fazal, a brilliant student, went away to Pakistan in 1947, joined the Pakistan Administrative Service and rose high. In 1980, when I went to Paris for a film festival, I was astonished to see Fazal coming up on an elevator in a departmental store. I was on the opposite side going down. We had to shout to acknowledge each other. The Paris air was rent by twin shouts of *'Ippo sollu isme sharief?'*.

Of course, though Partition was not all fun and games in the South, it was less violent, less disruptive than in the North. The real disaster of Partition was cultural, not political or 'humanitarian' as has been made out. If that was the case, the dreams of 'confederationists' like U P's Mulayam Singh would have little future. Partition was an irreversible cultural disaster. I will not go so far as the cultural leftists today and say that there was a cultural *'sangam'* (union) between Hindus and Muslims before 1947. But there was a Muslim culture which many Hindus took as their own. I will give an illustration: Prithviraj Kapoor, the great film and stage actor, was an enemy of the idea of Partition in the Forties. He produced a powerful play called *Deewar* campaigning against it. Partition came nevertheless and Prithviraj Kapoor continued his artistic life in India. I saw him for the first time in the early Sixties. He was speaking at the Radio Club in Bombay at a function in honour of K A Abbas's twenty-fifth year as a writer. Abbas was a leftist. Prithviraj praised him excessively. He exaggerated his fame. The important point is the words he used to denote that fame. He used Iqbal's great couplet to indicate that Abbas's fame had reached abroad: *'Kabhi Europe ke kaleesaon mein/Kabhi Afriqa ke tapte hue sehrason mein'* (Sometimes in the cathedrals of Europe/Sometimes in

the burning deserts of Africa). I was astonished, then I wanted to laugh. I looked around. No one was laughing. Prithviraj had just quoted Iqbal on the rise and spread of Islam in Europe and Africa. Prithviraj was using the language of pan-Islamism to praise a committed secularist!

So there was this culture but it was limited to 'Midnight's Parents', people who were thirty in 1947. Subsequent to 1947 this composite culture which was never really composite began to dissolve. But for Partition it would certainly have grown. From that point of view, Partition was a cultural disaster for the Muslims. For a certain section among Hindus, it was a cultural gift because it gave birth to the RSS and more important to the ethos of the RSS which today extends far beyond the organisation.

How does one convey the gradual spread of that disaster? As I said this is not a blood and tears tale. But the remorseless oncoming of the disaster was intensely felt by both Muslims and Hindus during 1945-47. I came almost weekly from Tambaram (Christian College) to see friends and relatives off at the Madras Central Station. They were going to Pakistan, some for love of Islam, others for jobs — but a certain common aspiration possessed all. For the first time in Indian history, Indian Muslims would be living in a Muslim country. A friend who had decided to stay on in India said on one of these trips, 'This is a mass psychosis. It is hopeless to fight against it'. In the 1946 elections, regarded as a referendum for Pakistan, non-Muslim League candidates in 'Muslim seats' were almost wiped out in territories that are now in India. The anti-Muslim League candidates generally lost their deposits. I told one of the Muslim Students Confederation

leaders, 'But you are committing suicide. You will be left behind to face the music here'. Almost universally I got the reply, *'Pakistan ka matlab kya hai?/La Ilaha Illallah'* (What is the meaning of Pakistan?/There is no God but God).

Looking back from the Nineties, it seems impossible to believe there could have been that grand illusion in 1945-47. But it was there as relentless as war. I could write a number of stories to illustrate this. But one which involves a girl called Gulnar perfectly captures its intensity. Gulnar's family grew up along mine in Nellore. My father was a District Education Officer, hers was a merchant looked upon with contempt by my mother who called Gulnar's father 'Bidiwale Kareem Saheb'. When we both settled in Madras, Gulnar used to meet me. There was no 'romance' between us (I am sorry to disappoint readers who might have expected a Mani Ratnam's Love Story, 1942). But there certainly was a sexual consciousness between us. Gulnar was a slim, attractive girl, always dressed in the best of fashion. Her father could afford it. She once took me to the Madras Christian College Library, to the Z section at the rear ostensibly to look for a book and kissed me. But it was nothing serious. Her father made a marriage proposal to my mother in a very indirect fashion. He spoke to my Urdu lecturer Mr Syed who was a self-confessed aethiest, a bold thing to be in the Forties. Mr Syed took the proposal to my mother. She said, *'Kaun? Bidiwale Kareem saab ki beti? Dekhenge, abhi jaldi kya hai?'* (Who? Bidiwale Kareem Saab's daughter? Let us see). Mr Syed was furious. He told me (I was unaware of all this), 'Just because your mother is connected to the Nawab of Arcot family, she thinks she can look down on Kareem Khan? Today, Kareem

Khan is ten times richer than your family'. Gulnar did not betray any awareness of the incident. She was friendly with my leftist circle but somehow seemed aloof from it. As 1947 approached, she became fascinated with the idea of Pakistan. She began to say, 'Forget your Hindu friends. Do you know what we will be after Independence? Remember what Ghalib says — "*Sar zarebaar mannate-i-darban kiye hue*" ' (Our necks bent before the watchman). Since I differed from her perception, I refused to discuss Partition with her.

One day in 1948-49 she sent word, 'I am going away to Pakistan. My father can arrange your migration too'. I did not reply. Finally she too joined the band of migrants at the Madras Central Station. She told me to come to the station. When she saw me she came out of the compartment. 'Iqbalbhai, there is still time. If you are prepared to come I will go next week'.

When I did not reply she told me, 'I am not going to marry you. I want you to come for the sake of yourself and Islam'.

I said, 'What about Jagath, Motaiya and my group? Do I betray them?'

'It is not a question of betrayal but after Independence, they will always be number one. You will be number two.'

'But I am number two. I may rise to number one'.

'Never in India. Jagath and Motaiya are communists but they are Hindus first and last. And you will always remain a Muslim. I know that Iqbalbhai, recognise yourself. Remember at school you used to weep when you recited Hali's anthem: *Ai Khasai Khasan Rusul waqt-i-dua hai/ Ummat pe teri aake ajab waqt pada hai* (Oh! Chosen of the Prophets, this is a time for prayer/Your people are caught

in a strange time)'.

'That was a long time ago'.

'But things have not changed! Who will remember Hali after Independence? Who will even understand words like *Khasai Khasan*?'

'No one'.

'See what I mean. You will be a cultural *yateem* (orphan).'

I wanted to conclude this argument which was becoming painful. I said *'Aap logo ne hamari duniya barbaad kar di. Ab yahan dil par pather rakh kar jiyenge'*. (You people have destroyed our world. We will live with fortitude).

Gulnar stared at me. Then she showed an unknown side of hers. She had a sense of humour. She laughed resignedly and said, 'Iqbalbhai, I know what you are. You are neither a Hindu nor a Muslim. You are a stoic Indian-English. You take pride in discipline and suffering — the last Englishman'. I felt relieved. Pan-Islamism had not destroyed Gulnar's sense of fun.

She left. As the train steamed away, a thought struck me which I still remember after half a century — the last seductress gone!

V *1947: Road to Bureaucracy*

GULNAR'S mockery had a point. It applied, in fact, to most of my generation. In a sense, Hindutva's charge today against the 'secularists' being un-Indian can be applied to my generation as well. It applied to even great ones among us — Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak. Ray was perhaps more 'Indian' than Ghatak. Ghatak was a real iconoclast. Few among the students of the Forties were Ghataks but they had that common feature. C E M Joad, a noted leftist writer of those days said, 'Why, everyone is a socialist now'. That was how the world looked in the 1940s. You could not dream that Hindutva would capture millions in the Nineties. That was the evidence both of our idealism and of our limited vision. We had come from pasts more traditional than that of the 'Kar Sevaks' of today. The leftists of the Forties left behind their pasts by intellectual effort. Today's cultural nationalism is the result of a refusal to make the effort to face up to the twenty-first century.

More immediate problems beset us in the late Forties. Ideological struggles go on but we came from middle-class households and had to find jobs in order to survive. Few were dedicated radicals like Motaiya. Even Mohan Kumaramangalam, the leading communist intellectual found a profession (legal) and blossomed in it. For the others there

was one path — the Civil Services examination for the Indian Administrative Services. Most of the bright ones took jobs as college lecturers or tutors and began preparing for this examination. I was one of them. We did not see the contradiction between our beliefs and our immediate needs. We ensured the triumph of Nehru-Patelism, which in a sense was essentially a continuation of the structure of British rule. The difference was that till 1947, the topmost posts could not be dreamed of by most Indians. Suddenly, after 1947 the highest posts were open to us — the middle-class, intelligent youth. My ancestors from 1850 onwards had been officers under the British. The best of them was my maternal grandfather, Khan Bahadur Abdul Karim Khan. He and my father could reach the second or third highest positions — next to the Chief Executive. After 1947, I outstripped all my ancestors. Despite that fact, on an objective assessment, I can today say that I am inferior to them in capacity. My elevation was the reward of freedom. Middle-class Indians would now rule India.

'Brown Sahebdom' is a facile phrase for this phenomenon. Most of us were radically different in culture and ideology from the British. At least the early bureaucrats were, in Nineties parlance, administrative guerrillas. In the early Fifties, my interpretation of Income Tax laws was so severely anti-corporate that an unpleasant exchange took place with the High Court judge who was hearing a reference against one of my orders. On the other side was a top Madras corporation represented by a very respected lawyer, very traditionally clad. Because it was my first appearance in the High Court, I put on a new suit gifted by my father-in-law, a UN employee. The High Court judge looked at me severely and said: 'So

you are Mr Masud?'.

'Yes, Your Honour'.

'Why do you go on using the word 'dynamic' in your orders. Are you a Nehruite?'

'Yes Sir'.

'Then please know there is no 'Nehru' interpretation of the Income Tax law. That has to go according to precedent'. Then, looking at my suit, the judge added, 'I find there is an element of hypocrisy here. You are much better dressed than the lawyer on the opposite side. So why do you pretend to be a leftist?' In view of the judge's fury, I did not deem it appropriate to launch on an explanation of the origin of my suit.

But I must be honest. Even though an element of anti-rich bias continued in me till the end of my service, it was muted and tamed by the general disgraceful surrender of the Forties boys to the status quo of the Seventies and Eighties. One of them told me in the late Seventies, 'Iqbal, your ideas were alright in the Forties but we have to grow up'. The disaster of India lay in the fact that the leftists grew up.

Going back to the late Forties and early Fifties, two events which affected my entire life happened in these years. First, I joined the top bureaucracy. Second, I opted for India on Partition. Today, the first event seems more important because I cannot imagine that I would have left India under any circumstances. But becoming a bureaucrat had not been on the cards. For good or bad, it affected my persona and changed it considerably. It certainly gave me the kind of vision which I would never have had if I had followed my instinct and become a journalist or an academic. Joining the top

bureaucracy was like a carricature of Upamanyu Chatterjee's fate in the early Nineties, hilariously described by him in *English, August*. There are some basic differences. Madras Christian College was never as 'Westernised' as St Stephens, Delhi. We would have laughed at Marcus Aurelius if we had read him in the original instead of reading about him in our political-literary courses. Second, I was a Muslim and that made a real difference. When I appeared for the Union Public Service Commission examination for the IAS and Central Service I was faced with a Board whose chairman was a retired ICS officer. V V Giri was there as a trade union representative. The Ambassador to Russia, K P S Menon was also there. I had read a number of books about such viva voces. It is amusing to recall them now. They were very practical — don't wear new shoes, they will creak, give answers to questions which will lead the examiner to an area familiar to you. I must say such humble advice proved startlingly useful.

I had hardly sat down when the chairman fired a question at me. 'Do you know where the line "Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?" comes from?'

I told him, and added, 'Sir, if you wish I can recite the whole passage in the poem'. (I thanked my adolescent passion for romantic poetry).

This created a stir in the room. 'Go on'. I did so. A member of the Board felt I had made an undeservedly good start.

'You are now working at Tiruppur (Coimbatore district). Do you know the staple of Tiruppur cotton?'

I replied, 'No'.

The chairman felt he should help me, 'Do you think we should cancel the debts incurred by the British during the

Second World War?' Now I saw the chance. 'No, we are not like the Russian Communists of 1917'.

The chairman fell into the trap. I mean into my happy hunting ground. 'What are the chances of a communist revolution in India?'

Dream question about which editorials are being written even today. My reflections impressed the Board. On such occasions there is always one hostile member. Here it was Mr Menon. 'I see you have taken Islamic History for your MA examination. What made you do so?' The voice of Hindutva fifty years ago.

'There was a vacancy in the Government Mohammedan College Madras'.

That prosaic reply foxed Mr Menon. But he came back strongly. 'What was the syllabus of your course?'

'We studied only Arab History'.

Mr Menon was delighted. 'So you didn't study Turkish history. Because they are secularists?' He laughed.

I thought to myself, you stupid man, I've got you now. 'Sir, from the thirteenth to twentieth century, the Turks were more fanatical than the Arabs. It is only in 1921 that Mustafa Kemel took over Turkey'. There was a stir of amusement in the room. I could see a faint smile on Mr Giri's lips. I said to myself, 'God, Menon will finish you'.

I was wrong. I got in because of my viva.

Compared to this, my not opting for Pakistan does not seem a dramatic event today. Certainly, the option gave my father some anxious moments. He took me to the Madras Muslim League leader, who proved to be one of the most unradical leaders I have met. 'See the first Budget of Pakistan

and then decide'. If such men had the destiny of Muslims in their hands, Partition would never have taken place. I decided to opt for India and went to the office in Poonamallaee High Road in Madras. My father was with me. Some distance away from the office, we saw a disturbance at the gate. My father asked a policeman in Tamil, 'Is that a Hindu-Muslim riot?' His Tamil was so perfect that the policeman could never imagine we were Muslim. 'No, it is a fight among our people' (*Nambal Aal*). My father looked at me. I told him as I walked towards the office gate, 'I know, I know. But I have decided to stay on.' The choice of a lifetime was made within a few casual hours.

VI *1947, 1950s: Cinema, Literature, Politics*

SALMAN Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* has, in a sense, obfuscated our understanding of 'Midnight's Parents', that is, the generation between the ages of twenty and thirty in 1947. Looking back, I find this the most fascinating generation of the twentieth century. Some writers, Vikram Seth being one of them, share this fascination. But the 'Midnight's Parents' themselves have not been very self-analytical in their writing with the exception of geniuses like Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak. Faiz had this to say about 1947: '*Ke intezar tha jiska yeh woh shehar to nahin*' (This is not the dawn which we had anticipated). But what about the 'we'? What about their own virtues and defects?

Let me talk about myself. I discovered the brilliance of Hindi cinema in *Kismat* of the Forties starring Ashok Kumar. *Kismat* was India's first genuine comedy. It was a cops and robbers thriller. Ashok Kumar played a master burglar cast opposite Mumtaz Shanti, an orphan singer and dancer. The film was both funny and self-parodic. Today erudite articles are being written about *Kismat*. But it is a very different thing to have sat in the Star Theatre in Madras in the Forties and watched the film. At this time I also discovered the greatness

of James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. I committed to memory Joyce's passages about the basic freedom of the artist. It is amazing how current European culture penetrated the minds of our generation. At one end was a popular literary magazine, John O's *London's Weekly* which you could pick up at a *paan* shop (admittedly not all *paan* shops) in Madras and Coimbatore. At the other end was Cyril Connolly's *Horizon*. I was introduced to this magazine by a fellow Income Tax probationer R S Murthy (who retired as Commissioner of Income Tax, Madras, decades later). Murthy was a Brahmin from Mylapore. He had the most 'advanced' taste in literature. Connolly opened the minds of at least two 'Madrasis' to the glories of mid-century European culture — poetry, fiction, painting, cinema. Recently, a very patronising biography of Connolly appeared in London. Whatever be the truth, it cannot take away from people like Murthy and me the transformation he effected in distant provincials of the 'Third World'.

Then of course there was Proust. A bookseller called Mahadevan in Mylapore had twelve volumes of *Remembrance of Things Past*. My salary even as a Class I officer was miserable. I asked Mahadevan to allow me to buy one volume every month. Mahadevan obliged. Such people cannot be forgotten even after the passage of half a century.

I got married in 1948 to Asgari, a 'forward' (to use a term of those days) Muslim girl, which meant she was 'convent educated' and did not observe *purdah*. In those days, Saturday was a half day. Asgari and I would start by watching the Saturday matinee show, evening show, night show, Sunday matinee show, evening show, night show! We lived near

Gemini Studios, Kodambakkam, Madras. The cinema houses were four or five miles away in Mount Road. We would either take a bus or more frequently walk the distance. We covered *Roshoman*, *Third Man*, *Sorry, Wrong Number*, *Awara*, *Aah*, *Aag*. This continued uptil the early Fifties.

On the surface, Hindi cinema remained surprisingly unaffected by Partition and Independence. The major films of the late Forties and Fifties — those of Raj Kapoor and Mehboob did not contain direct references to either event. But certainly there was a change — indirect but 'drastic'. It is surprising that the affect of Partition on cinema has not been examined in depth except in the case of Bengal. Mehboob's *Elan* was the first and last film to look at Indian Muslims from the inside. It was melodramatic and rhetorical. But it did go into 'forbidden' areas and make statements which would be considered controversial even today. For instance, it legitimised marriage with a foreigner. It laughed at traditional Muslim reactions to women's bare legs, it dealt in detail with Muslim backwardness and lack of education. These things continue today in a worse fashion. But no one has the courage to make a film on them. The ogre of insult to 'minorities' stands in the way.

All the same *Elan* met with official disfavour because it showed Quranic reform as the way out. It was banned temporarily during 1947. This kind of treatment is characteristic of establishment blindness.

But the long term effect of Partition was the disappearance of Urdu as a prominent element in film making. It is not merely a question of language but of the whole ethos of the film.

Take a film like the classic *Anmol Gadi* (1946). Surendra starred in this love triangle with Noorjehan and Suraiya. The whole atmosphere was 'Urdu' even though the characters were non-Muslim. It was a delightful film, at once romantic and hilarious. But most of the jokes depended on puns and parody which one could not understand unless one was familiar with Urdu literature. A few years ago, *Anmol Gadi* was shown at the National Centre for Performing Arts, Bombay. There was a large audience because of Noorjehan and Suraiya. I found I was the only person among hundreds laughing at the jokes. Urdu cinema was a victim of Partition.

Jyoti Punwani, a Bombay journalist asked me in the Eighties, 'Did your being a Muslim make a difference in your bureaucratic career?' In 1984, when I visited Karachi I was asked by an intelligent woman, 'It must have been a torture to have lived all those years in India'. The basic experience, of what Partition meant for urban middle-class Muslims, has not been examined. The late Nineties are a good time to review this once embarrassing question.

I was to witness the effect of Partition soon after I made the choice to remain in India on July 6, 1947. I was in a probationary Income Tax Officers' training class in Madras and my supervisor was Mr Chari, Senior Deputy Commissioner of Income Tax, a devout South Indian Brahmin. He was disappointed at my choosing India. He was a decent chap but he was what one would call today a mild Hindutva man. He didn't dislike Muslims but his reasoning was: 'They asked for Pakistan. Now let them go there and leave the jobs to Hindus'. In one way or the other this was the attitude of most of the officials from 1947 onwards. In some it was extreme

anger while in others, it was milder, more passive. But there was an attitude all the same. This made the Muslims a special kind of minority. A kind of vast alienation and isolation descended on them. It was as if they were in a huge glass cage. People outside it could see them but they could not know them. How many times since 1947, both officials and non-officials have told me :' You are a Muslim, but you are a South Indian or leftist or cosmopolitan elitist'. An alibi always had to be found for our 'Muslimness'.

Mr Chari mocked me. He would say in Tamil, 'If Iqbal has the right answer I will hand over the file to him'. His attitude was taken up by the 'merit boys' who (including myself) constituted twenty-six of the thirty trainees. The other four were from the scheduled castes (SCs). From the beginning hostility was evident between the SCs and the merit boys, a fact which has been duplicated in Government service all over India. Ponnan, one of the SCs would ask Thyagarajan, a merit boy, 'What is Hinduism?' and would not wait for an answer. In mid-1947, most of my friends were Brahmins as they are even today. But in that class I became pro-SC. In fact, the merit boys thrust me into that category and the SCs accepted me gladly. I became a visitor to the houses of Ponnan, Gurulingam and others. I was never on home-visiting terms in such a friendly fashion with the rest of the twenty-five throughout my official career of thirty-four years.

The merit boys were a devious lot. They concocted a poll dividing the class into those who were likely to succeed in future and those who were not likely to succeed. Naturally, at the bottom of the poll were myself and SC boys. I will not detail the irony of subsequent history as far as I am concerned,

lest I be accused of egoism. But taking advantage of the passage of time which mitigates all pettiness, I must state that the instigator of the poll ended up as Indira Gandhi's man and sought my assistance as one of the top executives for Mrs Gandhi's nefarious ends. But the merit boys did it for the SCs. When we entered service they kept the SCs down by various subterfuges so that none of them could rise to higher positions. Mr Chari did it for me in his confidential report at the end of the year (1948). He wrote, 'I do not see Iqbal Masud becoming an efficient Income Tax Officer'.

His bias led him into committing two mistakes. First, his judgement was not based on any examination of my work. Second, in his hatred he forgot to fulfil an elementary requirement. He did not communicate the adverse remarks to me. The remarks went up to Income Tax Commissioner, one Mr Naidu, who was renowned as an anti-Brahmin. He was surprised at the virulence against a young probationer. Out of curiosity he called me to find out how bad I was. When I talked like a man of average intelligence, he was surprised. He was decent enough to show me the adverse remarks. I immediately pointed out the two mistakes committed by Mr Chari. Naidu was impressed. 'OK, Mr Masud. Put down your protest in writing'. I did so promptly and blasted Mr Chari and his bias. When Mr Naidu read the report he was both surprised and impressed. 'Why, this is rather good'. He phoned up Mr Chari, read out my protest and asked him if he had anything to say. Naturally, Mr Chari hadn't. Naidu cancelled the remarks. As I came out of his room my feeling was 'I' have shown 'them'. For the first time I felt triumphant in post-Partition India. It did not strike me then, but the

realisation grew gradually. 'This would not happen to a Hindu in Pakistan', I thought to myself.

In my life there has always been a link between income tax and cinema. This is not entirely accidental for many film people have income tax problems. But I was fortunate that my work brought me into contact with people I admire. The most prominent of them were Devika Rani and Satyajit Ray. My association with them makes me think a little more kindly about my career in the Income Tax department which was more a self-infliction than a pleasure.

I met Devika Rani's husband Nicholas Roerich, a painter from a Russian emigre family. Roerich was a masterful man and when he came into my office in Bangalore, the office seemed smaller. No wonder Devika Rani fell for him. He was tall and handsome and she brilliant, possessing enormous knowledge of the arts. One mannerism of his confused me since I was not used to the gimmicks of the great at that time. He called Devika Rani 'Madame', 'Madame wants to see you'. Devika Rani and Roerich lived on an estate some miles away from Bangalore, called Tatgunni. The plants in the estate produced an element used in perfumed soaps like Lux. They made a fortune. After I had solved his little problem, Roerich invited me to the estate. Thus developed a long and affectionate friendship. Devika Rani, after the stress and confusion of her Bombay life, wanted an idyllic existence for the rest of her days. She found it — with Roerich, or so she thought at the time. The 'vanity' of human wishes is a cliché. As I write these lines and think of Devika Rani's later life, the essential truth of the cliché comes home. Devika Rani had taken every possible care to see that her life with Roerich

would be paradisical. The estate was one of the most pleasurable places to be in with trees stretching away into the distance. They had a lovely house, of course, magically furnished. When I first visited the estate and met Devika Rani, I was overwhelmed by it all. The beauty and charm of the pair, the ambience — taken together made it seem impossible that human beings could live a better life. To add to the charm of their existence they had a young dancer from Bombay, Tara (name changed), a kind of adopted daughter. Her beauty was different to that of Devika Rani's — it was rather statuesque and sensual. I had been invited for dinner. We sat down for drinks outside the house. It was the first time I had cognac. Entranced in the talk, I must have drunk a little more than I could handle. When the call for dinner came, I found I could not get up. What a disgrace, I thought. The first time I meet really charming, supremely intelligent and artistic people, I get drunk. But my hosts gave me a chance to save the situation. 'It is so wonderful here,' I said, 'let us have dinner here'. They graciously agreed. Many such evenings followed.

To repeat, it was all paradisical. But in that paradise lay the seeds of the disaster we witnessed years later in the Nineties on TV. *Newstrack* showed the couple decaying and falling apart. That was a cruel programme and I hated *Newstrack* for showing it. For me, it was like reading an immensely tragic novel. The first potentially disturbing element was the presence of Tara. She was near my age twenty-eight. So I wasn't overwhelmed by her. Also for the same reason, I was not unaware of the impact Tara's beauty and youth could have on older men. She had that impact on Roerich himself. But a greater and more obvious impact was

on a very great man of those days — Chief Justice Rajamannar of Madras High Court. Rajamannar had a reputation of being a *bon vivant*. But he really fell in love with Tara. This seemed to amuse Devika Rani no end. She once told me, 'You will see. I will bring Rajamannar to your house'. I tried desperately to avert this seeming disaster, but Devika Rani had a peculiar sense of fun. So one evening she arrived at my small apartment near South Parade (now called Mahatma Gandhi Road) with Roerich and Tara. And lo and behold, the great Rajamannar strode into my living room smiling charmingly. That is when I realised the devastating power of late age love. Emotionally, Rajamannar had become Tara's slave. He hung on every word she uttered, he tried to please her in little ways. This amused me because I could not see in Tara what Rajamannar and (unknown to me) Roerich saw. Devika Rani began to talk about her Bombay life. It was clear she didn't like to talk about those days. But she could sense the intense curiosity in me. I told her that I had fallen in love with her when I saw her in *Achut Kanya* (1936) when I was twelve. She laughed. 'Yes, I remember that film. My ex-husband (Himansu Rai) was so concerned about social issues. Ashok Kumar, he was a charming boy'. She didn't talk much about the decline and fall of Bombay Talkies, except to say the Marwaris had taken it over and destroyed it. She was so immersed in her present pleasures that it seemed Bombay Talkies were like a bad dream to her. So ended my first and last meeting with Rajamannar.

To divert to cinema, I saw *Pather Panchali* in 1956 at Bangalore and was overwhelmed by it. I spoke about it to Devika Rani. I was surprised she was not enthusiastic about

Ray though she admired the film. 'You know Iqbal, I did congratulate Ray on the film and then asked about his future plans. He replied shortly, "My future plans are my business" '. A typical Satyajit reply, as I came to discover later. It was tragic that two great artists coming from the same culture could not get along.

The Devika Rani triangle plus its associative romances continued till I left Bangalore in the late Fifties. Tara was 'taken away' by a doctor who had returned from abroad. He was of the same age as Roerich and Rajamannar. But he was determined to bring a 'regularity' to Tara's life. He married her and took her away to a hill station, where she perfected her art. When I came to Bombay in the beginning of 1962, Devika Rani phoned to warn me of the constellation of stars on February 5, 1962 when the sea was supposed to engulf Bombay. Rich Bombayites fled to Matheran. Being ideologically opposed to superstitions I chose that day to shift from Peddar Road to my new residence in South Bombay. I had a clear field driving down the Marine Drive. I did not tell Devika Rani about this. That was the measure of my love and respect for her.

As I write these lines, I realise I was in love with all the three of them — Devika Rani, Roerich and Tara. My association with them enlivened the drab life of a bureaucrat.

The life of a bureaucrat in a provincial capital like Bangalore did have its charms and minor disasters. When I began my life in the Income Tax department, I never thought I would make a success of it. But gradually, to my relief and alarm, I found I had a penchant for this kind of work. Income Tax law I could handle. But it was accounts which had so far

defeated me. After about five years, I mastered the mysteries of accounts. To my surprise, I became a feared figure in some business quarters in Bangalore. My anti-rich enthusiasm led me into some amusing incidents. Once, I was pursuing a well-known banker called Narayana Reddy. Being a powerful local man with a controlling interest in the local paper, *Deccan Herald*, he fought back. Headlines appeared in the morning, with me as the chief villain. 'Prosecution or persecution' screamed the paper. The then Finance Minister (I think it was C D Deshmukh) noticed this and called me at the Income Tax Commissioner's office in Bangalore. He found I had exceeded my jurisdiction in the investigation. I feared the worst — probably a transfer to the North East, which was regarded as the worst kind of punishment in those days. To my surprise, he wrote in the file, 'This is a mistake. But I don't punish mistakes committed against the enemy'. That was a Churchill sentence quoted in an Evelyn Waugh novel. The minister and I belonged to the same club.

My stay in Bangalore ended with a promotion. I received the news while hearing a case in my office. I adjourned the case, went to the bathroom, closed the door and screamed with delight. It was the first and last time I did that. But the motivation was similar to what I had felt on earlier occasions. 'I' had shown 'them'.

At Bangalore, during the Fifties I discovered Satyajit Ray and Guru Dutt. Bangalore had lovely cinema houses on the main Kempe Gowda Road (KG Road). It was a decent civilized road then, not the unpleasant mess it has become now. The cinema theatres were spacious and comfortable and offered good eats — an essential element of a good theatre.

One of my young colleagues, Srivastava and I discovered the cinema of the Fifties together. It was Srivastava, who had told me one fine morning, 'My Bengali friends say they have a masterpiece by a man called Satyajit Ray. They are showing the film on Sunday morning at a little theatre'. So on a rainy monsoon morning I discovered Manekda (Ray). Somebody should write a book or a monograph on the impact of *Pather Panchali* on newcomers. As I started watching the film, I said to myself in amazement, 'So, they are making films like this'. The 'literary' quality of Ray's films came through strongly. I began to feel I was reading a great novel. There were no sub-titles. But Srivastava whispered the essential dialogue. Today I cannot isolate the elements which overwhelmed me then. If you want me to be specific, I would say 'Poetry of ordinariness'. *Pather Panchali* taught you to look at your own life and the life around you with new eyes. Suddenly, you discovered that the maid servant who passed you on the road, unregarded, had beautiful eyes. You began to notice the quality, the tone of life as it was 'happening' to you at that moment. *Pather Panchali* changed me as a person.

Guru Dutt worked in a different way. In and through the conventional song and dance style, he exposed the dark underside of the urban middle-class soul. I went to see *Pyaasa* with Srivastava. He hated it, making adverse comments throughout the film. At the end of the film, he said sarcastially, *'Wah, Guru Dutt Saheb, wah!'* Conversely, I felt a kindred soul had reached out to me from the screen. I saw the film again and again. Was it the poetic, romantic, frustrated spirit of the Indian middle class responding to its most accomplished spokesman in cinema? I was told *The Times of India*

critic had condemned it as 'decadent'. In the Fifties I did not know the nuances of 'decadence'. So I sat in the theatre before *Pyaasa* and suffered the same egoistic pangs of Guru Dutt. This was the poetry of defeat, of a masterly egoistic despair, and it was the condition of the urban middle-class intelligentsia in its most secret self. I regard the twin discoveries of Ray and Guru Dutt in the provincial ambience of Bangalore as two of the greatest events of my life.

But the Indian middle-class individual also lived in current history. He happened to be a Muslim and a bureaucrat. These combined roles produced some peculiar effects. From the beginning I was suspect as a Muslim. A phenomenon came into my life and perhaps in many Muslim lives. This was the phenomenon of A P — Anonymous Petitions. They began in the early Fifties and continued upto June 1981 — the month and year of my retirement as Senior Income Tax Commissioner, Bombay. The essential elements in the A P were: Iqbal Masud is a Muslim; consequently he is a Pakistani; consequently he is sectarian, partial towards Muslims, a womaniser, a bribetaker and so on. As I recall the text of those A Ps from 1951 to 1981, what strikes me is the 'logic of consequentiality'. It indicates a feeling in a powerful section of the non-Muslim, not only about Iqbal Masud, but about Muslims in general.

It wasn't all as depressing as it sounds. My Deputy Commissioner in Bangalore in the Fifties, one Mr K M S Reddy was a club bird and a decent person to talk to socially. He was surprised I had read Eliot, Graham Greene and others. He was 'London returned' and so presumed that no one who had not been abroad could be aware of English or European

literature. But Mr Reddy's cosmopolitanism vanished when he began to receive the A Ps He would ask, in a seemingly casual fashion, for files of Muslims from my charge. He would ask my colleagues if I flirted with the girls in the office. It all came to nothing. But this did not prevent Mr Reddy's successors in Hyderabad and Bombay, where I went after I left Bangalore, from following his example. I worked in Hyderabad in the late Fifties and early Sixties as Dy. Income Tax Commissioner. I had to dispose of the Nizam's cases and of the cases of rich Muslims. I found that the Income Tax administration had practically declared a war against them in the Fifties after the Government of India took over Hyderabad following the Police Action. Many absurd mistakes had been committed. I was Dy. Commissioner of Appeals. Normally such humble creatures (officially we were 'administrative judges') did not take important decisions leaving it to the tax payers to fight it out at the Income Tax Appellate Tribunal or at the High Court or Supreme Court levels. Being an inexperienced bureaucrat I took my task literally which was to render justice even to Muslims. As I began to dictate orders granting relief, my steno-typist who was a South Indian Brahmin, became alarmed. 'Sir, this is dangerous. The department will call you "communal" '. He was frank, I told him, 'I know this, Srinivasan. But let's have fun in watching what happens.' Srinivasan looked at me in wonder. Obviously, when jobs could not be found easily for people beyond the age of twenty-five, my idea of 'fun' struck him as odd. The fun 'came' but of a Gothic kind. The Income Tax department screamed in protest. The Income Tax Commissioner wrote letters to me at Hyderabad and at Bombay

reprimanding me. This was illegal because in my judicial capacity I was absolutely independent. But the Fifties bureaucracy showed contempt for such legal niceties. In the Andhra Pradesh High Court, an advocate told the judge, 'Sir, this is a peculiar case. The tax payer is a Muslim, his lawyer is a Muslim, the Dy. Commissioner of Income Tax is a Muslim.' I do not doubt the authenticity of this story because the judge, a club friend, and a wonderful guy, told me this himself. Finally, the Ministry of Finance at Delhi transferred me from Hyderabad to Bombay. One of their top officials, who happened to be a fellow admirer of Urdu literature told me, 'Iqbal, my colleagues think you have the run of the Nizam's *harem*. You had better go to Bombay'. Things were not much better at Bombay. But one of my senior friends, I shall call him Mr Singh, saved me from disaster. When the chance came, he despatched me to South Yemen in 1965 on deputation with the UN. He probably saved me from a disgraceful end. When I returned, I had become a hot property and untouchable. I had ceased to be a 'Muslim'.

VII *1960s: Bombay, A Late Encounter*

BOMBAY, as a city, breeds affairs. People can fall in love with it as they do with a woman. Calcutta too breeds affairs, but of a different kind. Affairs with Bombay are macho and vigorous. Affairs with Calcutta are typified by Ghalib's couplet: *'Kalkatte ka jo zikr kiya tu ne humnishi/Ek teer mere seene pe mara ke hai hai'* (When you talked of Calcutta you stabbed me to the heart). An affair with Bombay is typified, indeed made immortal by Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*. It is a wondering, self-reflexive kind of an affair.

This type of passion for Bombay is bred only by growing up in the city. I came to Bombay too late for such passions. I was thirty-nine. Madras, Bangalore and Hyderabad and the mofussil towns before that Anantpur, Cudappah and so on had left their stamp. I sensed the 'difference' of Bombay and was unhappy in the first few months of 1962. Bombay then was on the way to turning from a fairly orderly metropolis to the roaring inferno it has become today. Films of Guru Dutt and Dev Anand made in this period reflect a comparatively comprehensible Bombay. All the same, if one left Peddar Road where I resided during the early months of 1962, for the Income Tax office in Churchgate, one had to leave before

what I called Peddar Road's 'Hour of Terror', which commenced from 10.15 a.m. If you were late, the drive became a matter of skill and risks. Today this traffic is comparatively controlled. Then it was pure 'free enterprise' in cutting across lanes. Bumping into cars was so common that it was described as a courtesy kiss and no one took any notice. Once, when I stopped at a yellow light pedestrian crossing, a BEST bus bumped into me from behind. Its driver came down and said, '*Aap ko public ka itna khayal hai to yahi hoga*'. (If you think so much of the public, this is what you will get).

Gradually, I got used to the ruthlessness of a Bombay road. I learnt all the swear words of taxi drivers and hurled them back, 'suited and booted' though I was. This caused consternation. One of the taximen at Churchgate station paid me one of the highest tributes I have received in my life, '*Wah beta wah! Bumbai main gadi chalana bhi seekh liya, Aur Bumbai ki gaali bhi seekh liay*' (You have learnt how to drive and swear like a Bombayite). It took me two years to get into the thrust of Bombay life.

When I shifted from Peddar Road to South Bombay my life pattern changed. Here was both culture and modernity — exclusive clubs like the CCI (Cricket Club of India, where I spent half my time swimming and writing film reviews), good cinema houses and finally 'culture places' like the NCPA began to appear. Rushdie grew up in this ambience. No wonder he exaggerated the pleasures of Bombay.

To turn to cinema. As in Bangalore, here too the Income Tax department and cinema came together. There was a film Income Tax circle and big artists could be seen coming and going. The affair of Madhubala vs *Filmindia* editor Baburao

Patel exploded in the Income Tax office. Patel wrote bad reviews of Madhubala's films. Her father accused Patel of using blackmail tactics. There was never a dull moment. The Sixties were the last years of the Golden Age of Hindi cinema. Guru Dutt produced his last brilliant films like *Kagaz Ke Phool* and *Saheb, Bibi Aur Ghulam*. *Kagaz Ke Phool* is one of the most moving autobiographical films ever produced in Hindi cinema. The torture of Dutt's emotional life, torn between his wife Geeta Dutt and Waheeda Rehman, was there for all to see. It did not succeed at the box office. The pain was, perhaps too obvious. Today, I regard viewing this film as essential to understanding the psyche not only of Hindi cinema but that of the Indian middle class too in the modern age.

Saheb, Bibi Aur Ghulam was a different kind of film. Directed by Abrar Alvi, it divorced itself from Dutt's personal passions and attained a degree of artistic objectivity. It is the most complete picture of 'decadence' in every sense of that rich word, in Indian cinema. Its distinction is that it is able to stand outside the passions it depicts, and yet remain human and possible. Only *Saheb, Bibi Aur Ghulam* was able to achieve it.

In Bombay, I witnessed the cultural decline and fall of its most notable industry — the film industry. The decline was epitomised by the 'suicide' of Guru Dutt. Guru Dutt's life was typical of the life and art of Bollywood. This fact has not been developed with the necessary sophistication in the numerous trashy 'documentaries' made about him. These have been mostly made by people who do not know Urdu. This is a basic defect of writings or documentaries about Bollywood. In fact,

this is the basic defect of film criticism in English of Hindi or Urdu films. The reasoning of such critics is that since cinema is a visual art, anyone qualified as a film critic can write about Hindi or Urdu films. Frankly, this approach is an ignorant and foolish one, particularly if you are dealing with popular cinema. For, in popular Indian cinema, it is the dialogue which catches the attention of the audience. In Guru Dutt's films, the dialogue and the stories were by Abrar Alvi, a maestro and the songs were by Sahir Ludhianvi and Kaifi Azmi, two of the greatest Urdu combinations of the twentieth century. Part of Guru Dutt's talent lay in bringing together the genius of these three great artists. This is the point that the writers and documentarists seem to have missed. For instance, two songs in *Pyaasa* have a very specific cultural context — the Bhakti geet, '*Aaj Sajan Mohe Ang Lagalo*' and the revolutionary song, '*Yeh Takhton, Yeh Tajon, Yeh Mahelon Ki Duniya*'. They are embedded in Indian cultures of very different types. Unless you understand the nuances of those cultures, you cannot write about *Pyaasa* or about Guru Dutt.

All of Guru Dutt's work is autobiographical. He was, as I said before, a middle-class urban romantic, who took his romance seriously. He loved all the attractive women he met. But his dual love for his wife Geeta Dutt and for the rising actress, Waheeda Rehman tore him apart. The deadly triangle is there implicitly in *Pyaasa*, explicitly in *Kagaz Ke Phool*. Art and life clashed tragically in the career of Guru Dutt. His greatness is that he made art out of his life's tragedy. Otherwise such triangles happen in Bollywood every other day.

From cinema to bureaucracy. The vast framework of central Indian bureaucracy can be viewed as an empire whose

history has never been properly recorded. One feature of this bureaucracy is that you get noticed only if you serve in big cities such as Delhi, Bombay, Calcutta, Madras. I did some of my best work before I came to Bombay. It was appreciated in Delhi but nothing came of it. In Bombay, I began to be noticed because as Deputy Commissioner of Income Tax, I was almost in weekly professional contact with big names like Nani Palkhiwala. They, of course, represented vaster empires of industry and media.

One media encounter is worth recalling because in an indirect way, it influenced my career. The late R K Karanjia of *Blitz* was a legendary figure even then. At that stage, in his 'shifting loyalties career', he was a supporter of the Nehru-Nasser axis. So his name counted in Delhi. This was one side of his personality. The other side was to write sensational exposés of industrialists — the familiar media game which is quite rampant even now. But in Karanjia's case, a peculiar situation arose. The High Court penalised him for publishing a false report about an industrialist. Mr Karanjia claimed the fine (about Rs 3 lakh) as an Income Tax deduction. His argument was that such articles were necessary for his 'profession' and therefore, the ensuing fines were deductable since they were necessarily incurred in the course of carrying on his profession. On my instructions this claim was rejected as an illegal activity which could not be treated as a 'normal course of professional conduct'. I lost the case before the Appellate Tribunal. A recommendation by my officers to go to the High Court on reference was made to me. I got a call from my friend Mr Singh, who was at the top of the tax department at Delhi. Now, the issue of oral instructions by

the superior officers is a sensitive one and has been discussed in detail by the Shah Commission investigating the Emergency irregularities. The Commission took the view that such oral instructions should not be obeyed if they were against the law or disputable. If the subordinate officer obeyed them, he should have a record of the oral instructions. Of course, no subordinate officer in his right mind would do such a thing. So the practice continued despite the Shah Commission's pious decision. Back in the Sixties, when the matter of *Blitz*'s expenditure came up, the situation was even worse. But I took a stand. I explained to Mr Singh that I had already written down my view of the matter and it would be very irregular on my part to go against it at this stage. Having said this, I expected a storm of abuse and once again, a 'transfer to the North East'. To my surprise, Mr Singh said, 'I understand perfectly'. If Mr Singh had merely said that, it would not have precluded later harassment. But to my great delight, he also said, 'I have issued instructions that a team of six senior deputy commissioners should visit the US to learn about their tax department. Your name is there'. Today it is difficult to appreciate what such a selection meant. To be selected from among hundreds of deputy commissioners all over India was itself significant. But to be sent abroad to the US was a chance of a lifetime. Mr Singh gave me that chance and I am eternally grateful to him. My four-month visit to the US in 1965 changed my entire consciousness and way of looking at things.

VIII *Flight to US*

IT was in early 1965 that a team of Income Tax Deputy Commissioners took off to Washington from Bombay. Bhaskaran, later to become Senior Commissioner, Bombay, was seated next to me. As soon as the plane took off, I ordered Carlsberg beer and tuned in to Brahms. 'Bye, Bye, Third World', I told a shocked Bhaskaran, who was always talking about the hire-purchase economy of the US. I was only partly trying to shock. Frankly, I felt a sense of liberation from the trappings and rules of various kinds.

I was brought down to earth a little when, at New York, they subjected us to strict customs scrutiny. But soon the US Internal Revenue Service (IRS) people took over and flew us to Washington. March is a cruel mouth in the US. I opened my hotel window on the morning of arrival and there was rain and snowfall. I had never seen a snowfall before. Through the rain and snow, I could see the title of the film in the theatre opposite. It was *Citizen Kane*. Now that was a real surprise and a very pleasant one. *Citizen Kane* was elite property back in India. Only fortunate members of select film societies could watch it. It was a thing you boasted about. And here it was showing in Washington in an ordinary theatre. I went over to the theatre. You could buy a ticket for a dollar

and watch the film over and over again till the evening. I gorged myself.

Gradually, the sheer amplitude of Western life overwhelmed me. Our supposed objective was to learn about Automatic Data Processing (ADP) — then in its infancy. This was used in Income Tax survey and investigation. To put it summarily, if you received $100 as wages from someone but did not show it in your Income Tax return, out would come a card showing the undeclared income in the IT office. The initiation into the mystery of ADP was made in various cities — Washington, New York, Chicago and other cities on the North East sea board. I made use of this time to discover the cultural life of the US. The four months I spent in the States changed my outlook substantially. I discovered the current magazine literature of America. I cannot now describe the delight with which I picked up an issue of *The New York Times Book Review* from a road stall and read its articles with profound admiration. The same goes for *The New Yorker*. The love affair with these magazines has lasted to the present day.

Then I discovered American theatre. To sit through a performance of Eugene O'Neil's *Long Day's Journey into the Night* was an experience I find hard to write about. There was another marvellous event. In Washington and New York I encountered Anees Jung, then working partly for our Embassy. She was well into the core of American cultural life and had the most amazing contacts. She knew a Russian Countess who had been a part of the Czar's court. Through her I got an invitation to a performance by Nurvyev, who had not emigrated as yet to the US. We were seated in the front row. Nurvyev leaped from one end of the stage to another,

girls stood up, screamed and threw flowers at his bared chest. Then the impossible happened. Nurvyev called the Countess to the backstage. The Countess introduced me. I do not remember what we talked about, but I carried away the impression of an exceedingly superior personality. On the rare occassions when I have had a similar experience was when I met Satyajit Ray.

All such foreign visits have their amusing side. This visit's farce came right at the end. Our tour concluded with the US government arranging a four-day meet of all the foreign visitors who had come under the US Aid programme in that quarter. We met, at what we would call here a hill station, in West Virginia. There were Indians, Arabs, Thais, Indonesians. On the first day there was an 'election' of a President, for fun. To my surprise, I was elected. The crucial votes came from the Arab participants, who liked my Arabic name. I had made friends with two charming American college girls who came to the final day celebration with their parents. I made a brief speech in English summing up my experience of the US, my praise and criticism. This seemed to stun the American audience. The parents of my friends came to me and said they were amazed. 'You spoke so easily without notes. We find it difficult to do that'. 'That is the only thing we Indians can do well,' I said to the shocked dismay of my colleagues.

At the beginning of my US visit, I had been a little unhappy after the initial raptures. Socially, March is a bad month for making friends. But as summer came on, I got to know a lot of people. If you are a visitor to the US and you speak with average intelligence and knowledge, you are welcome. You are not there to stay like African-Americans or other Asians

and pose a challenge to the WASPs and Jews for jobs. So you are invited to parties and generally given a pleasant time. My view of America, my nostalgia for its metropolitan life is coloured by my personal experience. Somehow I felt a kind of freedom in New York, Washington and Chicago, which I do not experience in a 'Third World' city. Of course, that kind of freedom is born out of material well-being. But, when one is happy one does not enquire deeply into the sources of that happiness.

When I flew back from US, I was miserable. The passenger beside me was a German woman coming to India for the first time as part of German Aid team. A third passenger was a Mangalorean entrepreneur flying between continents. All three of us got gloriously drunk.

When I went to the Income Tax office at Aayakar Bhavan, Churchgate, Bombay, the next day, and climbed up the stairs, I noticed and was revolted for the first time by the *paan* stains on the wall.

IX *Journey To Middle East, Discovery Of A Culture*

IN 1966, I was selected by the United Nations as Tax Advisor to the North Yemen Government — Yemen Arab Republic. The Government of India formally deputed me to foreign service. I was in the Middle East till the end of 1972. Those six years of foreign service are very privileged years of my life. I am among the very few Indian civil servants who served in North Yemen, South Yemen, Jordan and Lebanon at the 'ground level' of bureaucracy.

As a UN 'expert', I got privileged status on my return to India. If you are entitled to a UN pension you do not have to beg for jobs from the private sector after retirement and as a consequence show them favours.

My selection to the UN through the Government of India constitutes an interesting tale in itself, one which reflects on the habits of our top bureaucrats.

Jobs on deputation for international organisations are highly prized. Usually, they are snapped up by the Delhi bureaucrats who do not allow the offers to reach non-Delhi centres. Even if for form's sake, applications are sent by non-Delhi bureaucrats, they are not forwarded to the UN. In the case of the Yemen job, I was lucky. There was a reluctance

among Delhi bureaucrats to go to Muslim areas, which are regarded as backward and fanatical, apart from cities like Beirut and Cairo. Our bureaucrats want to have fun and games in Latin America or South East Asia. So no one in Delhi applied for a job in Yemen about which no one knew anything. When the official letter came to me in Bombay, I filled it up and sent it without any hope of success.

Since there was no one else willing to go, my name was sent as a matter of course to New York. Then fate intervened. An Indian working for the UN in some far-flung area who also happened to belong to the tax department, dropped into the room of the official who was dealing with my application. The latter casually enquired about me. The Indian official knew nothing about me but as a true patriot, he praised me to the skies. My name was sent to the selecting authorities. Some rumblings of what was happening reached me through Hasan Naeem, who was a poet and worked in our delegation at the UN. When I came to know of this, I pressed Naeem to send me more details. Naeem took his time. At last he wrote me a long letter which began with a quotation from T S Eliot: 'Let us go then, you and I / When the evening is spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherised upon a table'. That was his way of describing his meeting with the UN woman secretary who dealt with my application. Naeem had a cup of coffee with her. She disclosed that I had been selected but the consent of the Government of India had not yet been received. This information was furnished dismissively in the last few lines of the letter. I frantically contacted Mr Singh, my top boss. He told me he had sent my name to the minister. I talked to the minister's secretary

and was informed that someone in the minister's office had converted my UN salary into rupees and compared it with my miserable salary as Deputy Commissioner of Income Tax. This was one of the ways civil servants stopped people from going to prize jobs. By a stroke of luck, some well-wishers managed to convince the minister that the world would not fall apart if I went to Yemen. At last I was free to go.

I went to Beirut, the UN's head office for the Middle East. My first taste of the Middle East came when my name was pronounced correctly meaning the 'Q' in Iqbal and the 'U' in Masud were pronounced gutturally in Arabic. Arabs are great social democrats. Everybody from the head of the UN to the office boy began to call me 'Ya Iqbal' during the few days I spent in Beirut. The UN boss told me, 'I don't know what you will do in Yemen. There is a civil war going on there'. His knowledge of Yemen was no more than mine. I flew to Asmara in East Africa from where I was to catch a plane to Yemen. The only thing I knew about Asmara was that the French poet, Rimbaud, was buried there. However, I had no time to visit his grave and pay homage. Asmara was in the grip of other, more malignant forces. The Eritrian / Ethiopian forces had taken Asmara — an Arab city — and made it appear totally African. As soon as I arrived in my hotel, I began to receive secret messages from the local Arabs asking me as a UN man to take up their cause. I ignored their genuine grievances because I was on my way to another state. I travelled to Sana'a, capital of Yemen on a small plane. On the plane, I sensed something moving under my feet. I looked down and found it was a lamb. The plane was transporting animals for religious sacrifice in Sana'a. When we arrived at

Sana'a airport there was no ladder to get down and I had to jump.

All this did not dampen my spirits. I was in my early forties and prepared for this kind of thing. In Yemen, I discovered something new each day. Unkind critics described Yemen in 1966 as crashing into the fourteenth century. This was clever Western journalism. The truth was more complex.

Yemen was the first country to be converted to Islam after 'Hejaz' — now called Saudi Arabia. But the Yemenites were very different people from the Hejazis. They had their own culture going back to Solomon and Sheba. In fact, the presence of pre-Islamic culture was one of my most fascinating discoveries. In the twentieth century, Yemen had been ruled by Zaidi Imams (belonging to a Shia sect). The Turks who had conquered most of the Arab lands in the ninteenth century could not subdue Yemen. Yemen with its hills and valleys was ideal guerrilla ground. So the Imams survived well into the twentieth century, running the country as a religious establishment. This religious idyll was shattered by the Nasser revolution in Egypt. Slogans of freedom and Arab brotherhood deafened the air. The Imams fled to the hills, supported by UK and Saudi Arabia. The Nasserites took over Sana'a. The UN presence in Yemen became possible because of the Nasserite revolution, which was never wholeheartedly accepted by the Yemenites.

This was the problem in Yemen. The UN represented 'modernity'. But that modernity did not grow out of the soil. My six years stay in Yemen taught me a lot of things not only about the Arabs and Islam but about the 'development' of an undeveloped country.

However, I must not make all this sound too depressing. My Yemen stay from 1966-72 was an adventure in the best sense of the word. I was uprooted from safe familiar ways of doing thing — from a stagnant and increasingly futile Indian bureaucracy. I was now thrown into the midst of an ongoing development process in a poor and backward country which had a culture as ancient as India. The north of the country was Zaidi (Shia), tribal and backward. The south was Shafite (Sunni), increasingly commercial and, not a surprising contradiction in the 'Third World', also increasingly leftist. It was a situation with all kinds of complications. But despite the difficulties, I thrived and developed.

There was always a comic side to all this. In Yemen, and indeed in many Arab countries, an outsider is usually held suspect, either as a CIA or as a KGB agent. Coming from India I was a bit of a puzzle. I was sent to Yemen as Economist (Taxation). To test me, they kept me in what they called the Ministry of Economy, resembling somewhat our Planning Commission. It was a ministry of good intentions with 'foreign qualified' officials who were contemptuously ignored both by the traditionalists and by the radicals. I soon learnt that the Treasury or the Ministry of Finance was the place where the action was. I employed my developing diplomatic skills to get there. When I succeeded I was not sure I wanted to be there. The problem was that the Treasury was a dangerous place to be in. The life of the Finance Minister was always in danger. The building was an ancient fortress and the financial operations approached military action. The minister's office was on the fourth floor — quite high. His name was Ghazali (name changed) and he was a Captain in

the Army. The week before I joined, he had been attacked by tribals because he refused to give them money. For the tribals the Treasury was a place which gave you occasional doles. When attacked, Ghazali being a military man, jumped out of a window and landed on a jutting from the floor below. He survived but injured his leg. When I met him he allotted me a room above his. I measured carefully the distance between my window and the next ledge. It was clear I would not survive a jump.

I had not been there long when I had my first confrontation with the minister. Ghazali did not seem to know the difference between the UN and the US. He regarded both as unwelcome, but necessary agents for getting money or for obtaining technical help. The first day he sent me a letter saying: 'You are hereby ordered to draft an Income Tax law'. The letter put me into some difficulty. According to the terms of my contract with the UN, I was supposed to give technical assistance to local ministers and officials. I was not supposed to take orders from them. A year later, I would have ignored the letter and got on with the job of drafting the Income Tax law. But fifteen years of Indian bureaucracy had rendered me punctilious. I wrote a polite letter to the minister saying that I would certainly draft an Income Tax law but the making of the draft would not be subject to his 'orders'. This led to a dramatic scene in the minister's office — the kind of scene which could take place in states which were on the 'edge' like Yemen. The minister called all his officials into his chamber and placing me opposite him launched into a diatribe against the UN and US. For the first time I heard a sentence which was always on the lips of Yemeni radicals: 'We cannot be

purchased by American dollars'. After half an hour of this, I left the minister and went up to my room. I thought: I shall be getting back to India almost as soon as I have left it.

That would indeed have happened but for an Egyptian diplomat-cum-advisor to the Yemen government called Neklawi. Egyptians had a kind of parallel advisory mission to the UNs. The difference was that since they had the Egyptian Army behind them, their advice counted. We were now in 1966. The Zaidi Imam had been driven out in 1962 by the radicals supported by the Egyptian Nasserite Army. Since then a civil war had raged between northern 'royalist' Yemen and the other Yemen which called itself the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). The latter controlled Yemen's capital Sana'a and was recognised by the UN and consequently by most countries including India. The royalists were supported secretly by the British and Yemen's royalist neighbour, Saudi Arabia.

Neklawi was a fascinating character. He was an Army officer seconded to the Egyptian foreign service. While in Rome he had abducted an Israeli and attempted to send him via diplomatic bag to Cairo. For this offence, he was expelled from Italy, an event of which he was quite proud. He claimed that it was mentioned in the latest Supplement to the *Encyclopaedia Brittanica*.

Neklawi and I became close friends because Neklawi was an almost lunatic fan of filmstar, Nimmi. I did not know much about Nimmi but what I knew fascinated Neklawi no end.

When I had my row with the minister, Neklawi was aghast at the prospect of losing a good post-lunch friend. He rushed with me to Ghazali and told him, 'You can't expel him. He

is a Muslim'. 'We are all Muslims here' was Ghazali's indifferent reply. Neklawi tried another tack. 'He comes from India, the land of Indira Gandhi'. This seemed to have a better effect on Ghazali. After a brief while he nodded, 'He can stay'. I owe my UN career to Neklawi and Nimmi. And of course to Indira Gandhi.

Ghazali was one of the many ministers with whom I worked. The others were more pleasant. I remember one of them, Albasani (name changed) because of a very amusing incident. The Yemen Arab Republic government was professedly radical. But one should not forget that Yemen was the second country after Hejaz to embrace Islam. So Islam was deeply embedded in people's consciousness. Even the radical government strictly enforced Ramzan fast. I had been medically advised to eat meals at short intervals but I could not explain this to the authorities. Everyday, I would pack a small flask of tea and snacks in my bag which I kept in the bottom drawer of my table in the office. From there I would cautiously sip tea. If I saw anyone approach I would quickly close the drawer. This arrangement worked very well till one day Albasani entered my room unexpectedly instead of calling me to his room as he usually did. The cup of tea was midway between my lips and the drawer. Albasani saw it and stood dumbfounded. I explained my medical reasons but he was not impressed. In despair, I said, 'I may not fast. But my wife fasts'. Unexpectedly, my reply saved me. Albasani exploded with laughter because a cardinal principle of Islam is that on the day of judgement you will be judged solely by your individual actions. After this at all diplomatic parties, Albasani would proclaim, 'Mr Masud does not fast. But his wife fasts

for him'. Then he would be convulsed with laughter.

The radical YAR government was not always as pleasant as this. For the first time, I, a long time supporter of the 1917 Russian Revolution, saw how Marxism could be used to rule in a savage and Stalinist fashion. The 'royalist' (Imam) — 'democratic' YAR civil war went on unceasingly during the Sixties. Periodically people would be arrested in Sana'a, subjected to a summary trial by the 'People's Court' and shot within minutes of the sentence. I witnessed one such event, a shooting which took place in the 'Liberation Ground' right under the UN flag. After the shooting the bodies of the victims were dragged through the streets and the radicals jumped on them shouting 'Victory to Revolution'.

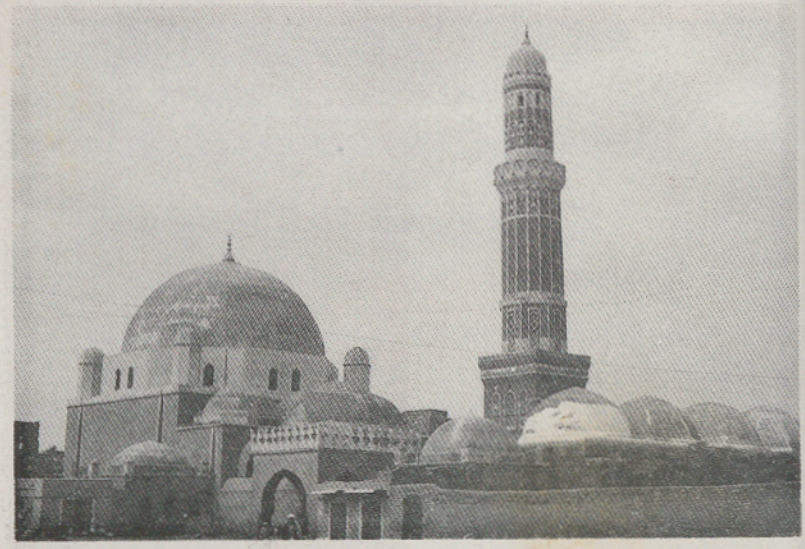
Horrified, I protested to the local UN representative, a Russian called Vasiliev. Now Vasiliev was a very humane person. When Robert Kennedy was shot, he wept. But when I reported the matter of shooting of the 'Royalist Yemenies' he remained stonefaced. 'Come now Iqbal, the Americans are doing worse things in Vietnam and getting away with it'. This was the first time I encountered Orwellian double think at this level and it shocked me profoundly. I was not to know then that there would be a repeat of such mentality in India during the Emergency.

To turn to the problems of Income Tax law enforcement in Yemen which are probably common to all traditional developing countries. Yemen possessed its own version of the Islamic law of taxation which imposed a ten per cent flat rate of tax on income and wealth. Even this was not administered by a central tax authority, but by local tribes, who paid to the Central Treasury what they claimed was the net collection.

Ghousunnisa Begum, third from left

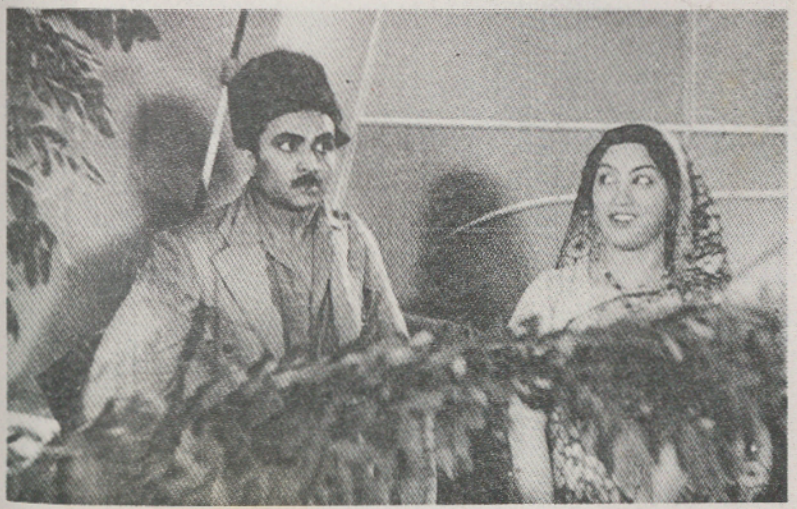
With Devika Rani Roerich, Bangalore 1959

With UN friends in Sana'a, 1967-68

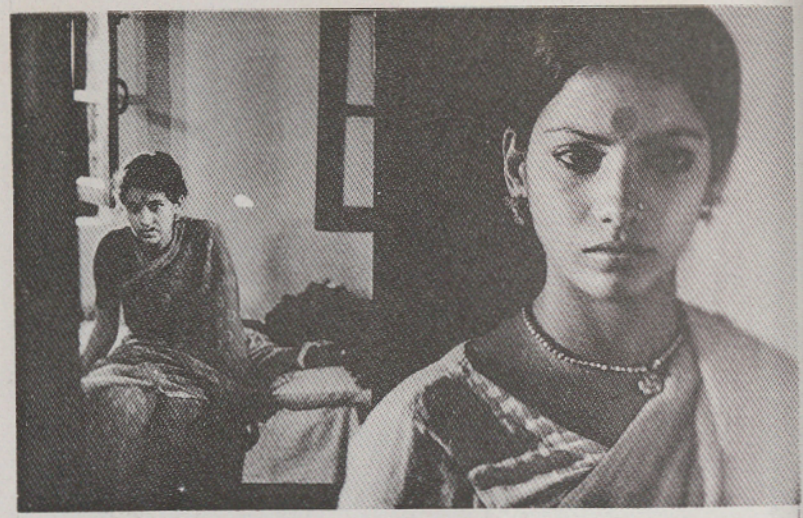


The Great Jamia, a huge library with a collection of ancient manuscripts, Sana'a

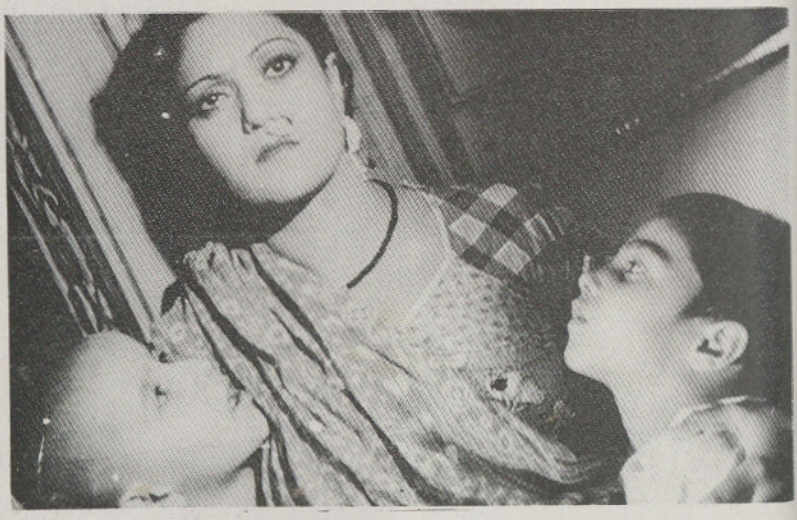
Sana'a, Capital of Yemen Arab Republic



V. Shantaram's Aadmi *(1939)*
Actors : Shahu Modak and Shanta Hublikar

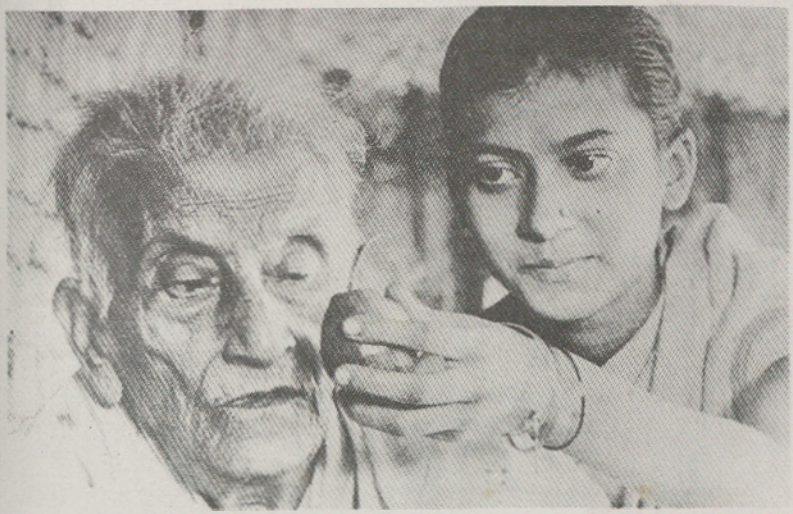


Shyam Benegal's Ankur *(1973)*
Actor : Shabana Azmi



Mehboob's Aurat *(1940)*
Actor : Sardar Akhtar

Raj Kapoor's Awara *(1951)*
Actor : Raj Kapoor



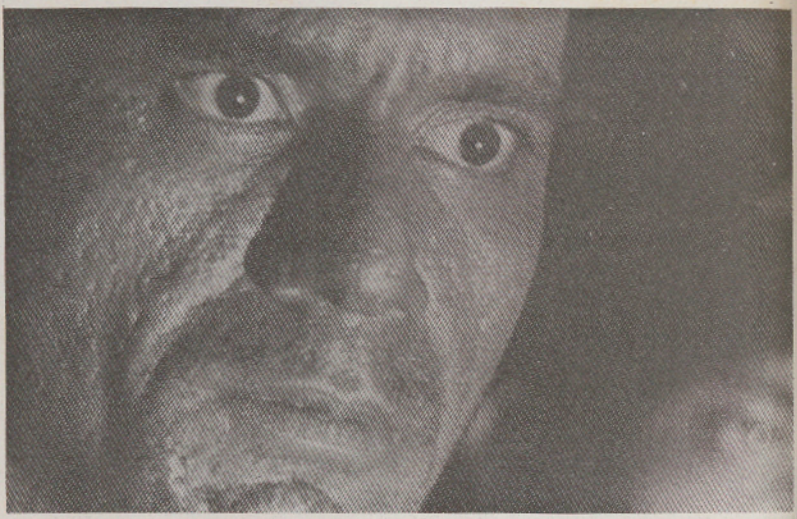
Satyajit Ray's Pather Panchali *(1955)*
Actors : Chunibala Devi and Runki Banerjee

Satyajit Ray's Aparajito *(1956)*
Actors : Karuna Bannerjee & Smaran Ghosal

Mani Kaul's Uski Roti *(1969)*
Actor : Garima

Guru Dutt's Kaagaz Ke Phool *(1959)*
Actors : Guru Dutt and Waheeda Rehman

Gyan Mukerji's Kismat *(1943)*
Actors : Ashok Kumar and Mumtaz Shanti



Govind Nihalani's Aakrosh *(1980)*
Actor : Om Puri

Guru Dutt's Pyaasa *(1957)*
Actor : Guru Dutt

Nobody checked this statement. My draft of the Income Tax Act brought in two vital changes. First the tax administration would be carried out by the Central Government and second there would be a progressive rate of Income Tax instead of a flat rate.

This amounted to a revolution. The President of the Republic wanted me to explain the draft law to him. When I convinced him in my struggling Arabic, I felt a sense of triumph.

As the Sixties went by, the political situation became complex. By 1967-68 'Southern Yemen' meaning Aden and neighbouring regions like Hadhramaut became free of British rule. I was appointed Income Tax Advisor to Southern Yemen now called Democratic Yemen. Round about, this time I went through an experience which explains why UN personnel are paid fairly substantial salaries.

North Yemen had three important cities — Sana'a, Red Sea Port Hodeidah and Taiz, near Aden. As an Income Tax expert, I had to transit frequently between these cities. In all the cities strict martial law curfew was imposed at night.

The curfew administrators were more often than not young boys who would shoot first and talk later. The UN cars were exempt from curfew but this knowledge was not always imparted to the curfew guards. One evening the car in which I was travelling with Malhotra of FAO was shot at by a guard. I was driving. The bullet passed through a petrol can in the dicky, the rear seat and then hit my left thigh. This was the first time I had been shot and I did not realise what was happening. My left foot came off the clutch and I told Malhotra, 'There is something wrong with the clutch'.

Malhotra said, 'No, you have been shot and blood is streaming from your left thigh'.

By this time, the curfew guard had come up. He was a boy of about sixteen or seventeen and was quite shocked by what had happened. I was rushed to the local government hospital where a bit of farce took place. The power supply was unsteady and so the X-ray could be taken only when the full supply came on. I lay stretched out in the X-ray room for thirty minutes before an X-ray was taken of my leg above the knee. According to the doctor, the bullet had passed out of my system. Fortunately for me, the UN head happened to be a doctor who said, 'No, please take another X-ray of the patient's leg below the knee'.

We waited for another half hour. The bullet was there alright, below the knee. The local doctor said, 'I am going to operate'.

I said very firmly, 'You are the one person in the world who will not perform the operation'.

So I was taken to the courtyard of the hospital. The minister came down and a sort of sub-cabinet meeting was held round my stretcher. The government wanted to suppress the news of my shooting since it might lead to complications. I told them, 'I am not concerned with that. But get the bullet out'. The cabinet proposed the name of a Chinese doctor. India-China ties were very bad at that time. I refused. They finally managed to get hold of an Italian doctor who worked in Belgian Congo who operated the next day. The operating room was full of other operations being performed to the accompaniment of screams of pain and horror. I suffered agonies while the Italian extracted the bullet but managed to

get through the operation. When I visited Bombay some time later and showed my leg to a specialist, he said, 'Your surgeon's operating technique is twenty years out of date. You should consider yourself lucky to have survived.' I took back a saree for the Italian doctor's wife.

Before I shifted to Aden, I witnessed the climax of the royalist–republican war in 1967-68. I will describe this in detail in order to indicate the mechanics of Western intervention in Arab States.

In 1967-68, the royalists launched a big push from the north. This was made possible because of Egypt's defeat by Israel in the 1967 war. This was a war that reveals the tragic consequences of defeat on a people. The first days of the war were obscured by Egyptian propaganda. The destruction of the Egyptian Air Force was concealed. When the truth became apparent, the effect on Egypt-occupied Yemen was tragic. The Egyptians began to withdraw their forces from Yemen. A general, a good friend of mine stood in my apartment and watched the army retreat. For the first time I saw a grown man break down and weep. He said only one sentence, which I can never forget — 'Oh! Iqbal, for a Salahuddin,' (Saladin, victor of the Crusades). The Arab tragedy was and is that Salahuddins do not come back.

The departure of the Egyptians knocked a big hole in the Republic's defences. The royalists aided and abetted by the British, surged forward and besieged Sana'a. The UN families — women and children — were evacuated, only the officers were left to face the onslaught. I endured three months of bombardment by the besiegers.

After the Egyptians left in 1967, Sana'a was besieged by

a mix of royalists and British and Dutch mercenaries.

Suddenly weakened, the Republican forces retreated into Sana'a. It is not easy to recount the experience of a three-month siege and continuous bombardment. In the month of Ramzan the bombardment ceased only for two hours for the morning and evening meals. The UN administrative official was Subhash Rishi, a gutsy fellow. When the bombardment became intense both of us went to the Russian Ambassador. India and Russia were close and he wanted to know what the Russians intended to do.

What we got was a torrent of high-minded talk from the Ambassador. 'How can you think of leaving? India and Russia are great powers, we cannot run away'. Charged by this talk, I came home and started finalising the Income Tax Act. Next morning Rishi rang me at six. 'What are you doing?'

'Preparing the Refunds Chapter of Income Tax law'.

'Forget it. The Russians left the city an hour ago', he told me.

There are some embarrassing diplomatic events which people find it convenient to forget. Rishi and I drew a veil of silence over this event. Probably, this is the first time it is being described in print.

Rishi and I got on with life under siege. We could not leave Sana'a till the UN directed us. I lived in a building with four flats. Only the top two were occupied now, one by me and the other by a tribal Sheikh. Apart from a formal '*Assalam Alaikum*', when we met on the stairs, we hardly knew each other. The guerrillas came closer to the city. The bombardment became accurate. The Yemeni boys were used to carrying guns from the age of seven. They would clap their hands

when the shells landed and bet about the next target. The Republic came to life. It created its army under attack and started repelling royalist attacks. I saw a nation come to life. That is the most powerful memory of my Arab years. I remember I wrote enthusiastically in Churchillian fashion to a friend, 'Sana'a has saved herself by her efforts. She will save the Arab world by her example'.

All the same, personally it was a disintegrating experience. An Egyptian journalist friend told me, 'You are making a mistake. You should do what your neighbour Sheikh does. He gets a group of girls each night to his flat. They all scramble out before the morning'.

I didn't try to investigate this. But one morning when the bombardment was too noisy, I came out of my flat and sat on a chair. Suddenly a gaggle of girls came out of the Sheikh's flat and ran down the stairs laughing. I stared in disbelief and then I said, 'Sheikh, I salute you'. I sent up a prayer: 'Saint of Ajmer, get me out of this and I shall pay you a visit next year'. Next morning, a Russian plane landed on the orders of the UN and took us all away to Cairo. When I came back to India, I visited the Ajmer shrine and paid my tribute.

Cairo is regarded by the Arabs as the political, cultural even geographical (don't ask me to work this out but it is an article of faith with the Arabs) centre of the Arab world. Not only of the Arab world, Qahira (Cairo), is a name which thrills Muslim hearts all over the world. It has the greatest Sunni Muslim theological University, Jamia-Al-Azhar.

I took a cab from Cairo airport to Zamaleck, the 'Westernised' residential part of Cairo. On the way, the driver came to know that not only was I from the UN but I was

from the 'land of Indira Gandhi'. At my Zamalek hotel he refused to accept the fare — a substantial sum since the hotel was twenty miles away from the airport.

The mantle of Nehru had descended on Indira Gandhi. In Nasser's great days, the trinity of Nasser, Nehru, Tito possessed the Egyptian intelligentsia. Hence the great respect and affection for his daughter.

The Zamalek pension was special. Here foreigners were watched closely — it was practically surveillance. Devices were planted in light bulbs, phones and other unexpected areas. Before I became aware of these gadgets, I used to talk freely and critically of the Egyptian government and its ambiguous role in Yemen. It was a Sri Lankan expert, who gestured furiously to me at dinner pointing to the light above. After that I confined my political talk to the open road.

All this was a reflection of living in a police state which was what Nasser's rule had become by 1967-68. But Nasser could not take away the multiple charm of Cairo. For instance, Al Azhar was a marvellous religious university. You could sit at the feet of a number of scholars in the mosque. Alongside you could be a girl in Western dress. She would cross examine the scholar in a most intense fashion. When people today talk of conformist / reactionary Islam I say, 'Go to Al Azhar'. Outside Al Azhar were mosques and shrines. Their architecture was magnificent, their interiors genuinely spiritual. It did not take more than thirty minutes to travel from one of the most classical areas of Islam to modernity on the Nile in the shape a Sheraton. Here, of course, everything was five star — no different from any five star hotel in the world. Then you could travel to Zamalek with its

modern clubs and residential areas. In the clubs the talk was often urban-liberal-intellectual — you could be in the Willingdon Club, Bombay. The intellectuals of Cairo are a class by themselves. The dialogue is in French, English and Arabic. I have had a most exhaustive discussion of Evelyn Waugh's novels with a lady of Anglo-Egyptian parentage in one these clubs.

Then of course there was the tourist land of belly-dancers. This much written about part of Cairo culture will remain fascinating for a newcomer. Forget what you have read about the belly dancers. Their sensuality is very real and many-sided.

In Cairo I felt the 'mass hero fever' which frequently possesses Arab cities. Nasser had resigned after the defeat by Israel in the 1967 war. The demonstrations asking him to come back were real and emotionally charged. At the house of an Indian friend, I watched a part of the demonstration on TV. Suddenly, an Arab maid who was watching TV with us got up and shouted pro-Nasser slogans. She was not showing off to anybody. She just got carried away.

This mass emotional surge carried Nasser back to power. But his legendary psychological hold was broken. Dissident groups began to rise. The problem with such groups was that they had to work underground. The absence of open debate and intellectual freedom in most Arab capitals is depressing. Behind the scenes the debate is as intense as in India. But when you come on to the streets and go to shops which sell foreign papers, you find magazines containing articles critical of the government missing. This kind of cultural suppression continues to this day.

Despite this Cairo produced dissident intellectual writers whose greatness has been internationally acknowledged. Having seen the conditions in which such dissidents have worked, I salute them for their near heroic devotion to freedom.

That too is part of Islam's classical past which contains in itself sources legitimising dissidence. This is the fact which is missed by most non-Muslim students of Islam.

The dissidence in Egypt went to the Right and not to the Left. This is very clear now but its roots lay in what happened in 1967-68. The summary defeat of Egypt by Israel in the 1967 war produced a wave of self-questioning not only in the Arab world but in the Islamic world. Thus 1967 becomes a seminal event in the history of Islam as much as 1254, the sacking of Baghdad by the Mongols, which increased Islamic conservatism — a bid to save itself — or 1452 when the Moors were pushed out of Spain by the Christians making Islam a totally Oriental religion. 1867 gave a push to Islamic radicalism, misrepresented as 'fundamentalism'. The Islamists wrongly called fundamentalists scoured the history of Islam to find a philosophy for survival against Israel and the West. They found it in a great medical philosopher called Ibn Taymiyah, who sanctioned revolt against a so-called Islamic government if it became un-Islamic. Islamists turned Nasser's Arab Socialist Revolution un-Islamic and attributed the victory of Israel to the un-Islamicness of Nasser. This was the famous Muslim brotherhood and its numerous allied groups. Nasser savagely tried to crush this movement. But it survived and gained a measure of triumph years later when the Islamists assassinated President Sadat for his humiliating surrender

as they called it in Israel. Today the movement is very much there in Cairo waiting to take over from the isolated President Mubarak widely regarded as America's Gendarme. I saw this movement grow in few months in Cairo in 1967-68 and I have kept track of it since then.

The time had come to return to Yemen. I did so, but it was to a divided Yemen.

Aden or Southern Yemen became independent of the British in 1967-68. I was appointed as the UN Tax Advisor to both North and South Yemen. It must have been one of the most strange appointments. In the North the radicals had been overthrown and the government had been taken over by traditionalists. In South Yemen with its capital at Aden, a Maoist Government had come to power in 1967-68. I was appointed as Tax Advisor to both governments.

This led to a kind of professional schizophrenia. In the North I had to be conservative in my tax proposals otherwise there would be no chance of being accepted. I found the South initially more ideologically emphatic. I wanted to change the Arab/Islamic traditional tax structures. Aden had already developed a tax structure similar to India's. In fact, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, it was part of the Bombay Province. Many of the Aden laws such as the Penal Code and the Evidence Act were identical to India's.

I radicalised even this tax structure. To my initial surprise and later alarm, my radical approach was enthusiastically taken up and pushed beyond the frontiers where I wished to stop. For instance, in the matter of Income Tax prosecution and penalty, the doctrine of burden of proof being on the prosecutor was ignored. Traders, suspected of tax evasion

were arrested and subjected to summary trials which were shown on TV.

I protested against this. My protest was misunderstood because most of the suspects were of Indian origin holding British passports. Their assets were summarily 'appropriated' — a peculiar term which in effect meant that the assets were taken over by the State for good. A series of dramatic meetings took place between me and the minister. The minister feigned surprise, 'But I thought you were radical'.

'But I am also bound by what is regarded in democracies as a fair system of law. What you are doing disregards this principle and as a UN official I cannot approve this'.

A grim silence ensued. By this time I had enough experience of rulers to know that silence boded ill.

To add to the problems, South Yemen was a divided land. Aden had attained some degree of commercial prosperity under the British but the hinterland was backward and poor. In fact, it was among the poorest in the world. To travel from Aden to the East to an area called Hadhramaut was to travel to a land of great beauty and utter human deprivation. I had not seen such poverty even in the most miserable part of India. The children were sick. Their parents were starving. They crowded around my UN car, thinking I had brought them food or medical supplies. But the government at Aden seemed not to worry. Their attitude was one of defiance towards North Yemen and to the territories on the East (Oman). I remember thinking that Hadhramaut was ideal shooting ground for a Hindi masala film. All their melodramatic horrors are actually found on the ground.

My minister was a clever man. He would not make me

a martyr by asking for my removal. Instead he wrote to the head of the UN, 'Mr Iqbal Masud has done such good work here that his mission is no longer needed'. The head of the UN in Aden was a Pakistani. He knew what was going on. He pretended to be sorry for me but wrote to the UN agreeing enthusiastically with the minister. My term in North Yemen had ended. My term in South Yemen had been terminated. The UN people at the headquarters knew what was happening. But they were helpless. So I was withdrawn from Aden.

The UN transferred me to Amman in Jordan. Jordan at this time was totally financially dependent on the US. You have to work in the Finance Ministry of a company to know the truth of its politics. The US Administrator of the Aid became a good friend. Even the current expenditure of the Jordan government at that time was funded by the US. The US Administrator wanted me to raise local finances so that the flow of US funds could be reduced. Work in this direction in Jordan was administratively easier because Jordan too had a British inspired system of Administrator.

But I would rather write about Amman itself. It is one of the most beautiful cities of the world, spread out from the Arab quarters with a more modern section with Western style houses. It was a lovely walk from one quarter to another. I would usually walk at night, while returning from an Indian film in the Arab quarters. I do not think even in India Indian films have the impact they have in the Middle East. I remember a rather mediocre film with a love triangle. All the women in the audience wept.

During these walks, I discovered that some of the world's most beautiful women lived in what was called Fertile Crescent

— Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and the surrounding areas. Probably this was because of the mixing of European and Arab races during the crusades. The Muslim women kept off the streets during the day. One night when I was walking through a deserted street, I came across four Muslim girls playing improvised badminton. They did not run away because I was a foreigner and a Muslim. Instead they politely said, '*Asllam, Alaikum*'. I have rarely seen such beauty in women — a mixture of French symmetry and burgeoning Arab sensuality.

My UN-appointed secretary was a Palestinian Christian called Jacqueline. She too was beautiful in a more modern fashion. Her people had been massacred by the Israelis in the 1947 war. Her mother had survived. But her fiance was a Palestinian guerrilla operating in the North in Syria and Lebanon.

The Government of India Home Ministry people began making a fuss about my return. I had been away for more than five years. The UN offered me job. I could continue on 'term basis' with the UN and resign from the Government of India. I chose to return because of the Indian bureaucratic obsession with 'permanency'.

In December 1972, I left the Middle East and travelled to India via Beirut. Jacqueline told me that Ayaz (name changed), her fiancee would meet me at Beirut. At Beirut airport, despite the security Ayaz came to my dining table. He said simply, 'I am Ayaz'. We didn't talk much because waiters were hovering around. I gave him a packet of money. He said, '*Shukran*' (thanks). When I got up to leave, he said the famous Palestinian slogan in a low voice: 'We shall return'.

Those were the last words I heard when I finally left the Middle East.

X *The Dark Night of the Emergency and the Shift to Calcutta*

Returning to India from the Middle East after nearly seven years was an unsettling experience. I could smell Bombay from the air. Along the drive from the airport to South Bombay, looking at school and college girls walking in groups I wondered if an epidemic had struck them. Their legs appeared to be thin compared to the sturdy limbs of the Arab, European and American girls.

The Indian Home Ministry had dragged me back from the UN service. Delhi bureaucrats do not want anyone except one of their own tribe to serve for a long period and earn a UN pension (you have to work in the UN for five years to qualify for pension). Despite the best efforts of Delhi bureaucrats, I managed to serve more than six and half years, but they eventually triumphed. They took the tough line with the Indian *Charge de Affaires* at Amman, Mr Khaleeli, and said that I was dutybound to return home. When he explained that I was doing good work they charged him almost explicitly with communalism. No trick was too low for the bureaucrats at Delhi to get me back to India. One of them told me after

my return, 'You UN experts wine and dine the poor local bureaucrats to get extensions'.

On my return, I was given a senior post by the Ministry of Finance, in charge of legal matters pertaining to appeals to the Supreme and High Court, However, as I was to discover, they had been in no hurry for my return. The mischief had been made by the Home Ministry. Probably they are upto the same game today, it is their professional disease.

I began work sometime in 1972 and discovered gradually that the atmosphere in India and in the department had changed. There was an air of uncertainty in the country. Despite the victory in the Bangladesh war, Indira Gandhi had begun to lose political legitimacy. She was no longer regarded as 'the only man in the Indian cabinet.' Various movements for grassroots freedom had begun with J P Narayan as one of the leading rebels.

The years before the Emergency were a strange period. I used to stand in my Income Tax balcony in South Bombay and look down on the Queen's Road (Maharshi Karve Road) where demonstrations by students were held. They used to surround the Income Tax office and pelt stones at the cars of the officials. The atmosphere inside the central Indian administration had become communal. BJP-RSS had realised that in order to get power at Delhi you had to become 'respectable'. There were two ways to do so : First, enter the media and change the public perception of Hindu nationalism. Second, join the bureaucracy and strengthen the hold of BJP and the RSS from within. I was confronted with a dilemma arising from the latter situation.

I was one of the few Muslims at a senior bureaucratic

position.

The post of the Commissioner of Income Tax was and still is a powerful one. He enjoys a lot of discretionary power, both written and conventionally accepted in actual practice. Let me furnish an example to illustrate how this fact came to my aid once when I found myself in a tight spot.

There is a Muslim religious publishing house, Taj Book Depot, which publishes the Quran and other religious books. The owners of this concern had been close to Gandhiji during the Khilafat struggle. They were always regarded, to use the parlance of those days as 'nationalist Muslims'. The partition did not affect their relationship with the Central Government. Even during the period of which I am now writing, early Seventies, a senior member of their family could walk into Indira Gandhi's room.

Now, it so happened that a very junior, Class II Income Tax officer, deduced a peculiar interpretation of a rule which, generally speaking, allows a substantial tax rebate to publishing houses. He denied this to the Taj Book Depot on the ground that it was not a publisher of books but of religions tracts. This absurd view had been accepted by the Taj Book Depot for nearly two or three years before I came to Bombay. Such was the power of the BJP-RSS idealogues in the bureaucracy. When I took over in 1972-73 a representative of this concern — a Parsi Advocate, very hesitantly approached me and sought my help. I was furious with him. 'You are being extremely timid. Do you think my predecessors would not have cancelled this absurd order. File your revision applications now'. When the applications were filed I called the officer before cancelling his orders. 'You really feel that the

Taj Book Depot is not a publisher of books?'

'No, Sir. The Quran is not a book. It is a religious tract'.

'What about the Bible?'

'The same, Sir'.

'What about the Geeta?'

'Sir, that is a book for all mankind'.

I cancelled his ruling of the case. I also recall this incident to show how the communalisation of the Indian bureaucracy started.

Alongwith communalisation, radical popular moves were being made against Indira Gandhi. The point to be noted was that the Jan Sangh-RSS initiated the popular drive against Indira Gandhi and, in fact, took over it with J P Narayan as their nominal head.

Many members of the intelligentsia were caught in a trap. They had begun to dislike Indira Gandhi's increasingly manipulative and fascist ways of ensuring personal rule. On the other hand, they also perceived the fascist elements in the Jan Sangh-RSS revolt against her. This explains why leftist parties including CPM (Communist Party Marxist) broadly remained on Indira Gandhi's side and lost credibility for this reason in later years. The Emergency was declared on June 26, 1975. I remember that clearly because it is my birth date. I felt miserable, but I also realised that at the age of fifty-two you could not afford to resign and find another suitable job. Of course, there was my UN pension, but it would start coming in only after a few years. So I continued as the Commissioner of Income Tax, Bombay. Looking back today, I feel that decision gave me an advantage. I could see the workings of both present and future fascism from a very

unique, 'insider' position.

A huge number of books, fictional and otherwise have been written about the Emergency (1975-77). Some, like Khushwant Singh have justified it, while others, like Arun Shourie and more liberal writers have been very critical. However, very few have got under the 'skin', so to speak of the Emergency. In other words seen it from within.

A revealing incident in the first few days of the Emergency will elucidate what I mean. A few days after the Emergency was declared, V C Shukla, Minister for Information & Broadcasting came to Bombay to explain it to us. My new Income Tax boss at Delhi who was an Indira Gandhi man came alongwith Shukla for a cultural meeting arranged by the latter. I was surprised to receive an invitation from progressive writers. One of them was the famous Urdu poet Ali Sardar Jafri. I decided to attend the meeting out of curiosity. When I reached the meeting, I was warmly welcomed by the leftists and placed in the first row. My boss too was there alongwith Shankar Menon, a Maharashtra IAS officer. I gathered, on enquiry from him and others that we had been selected as the 'progressive' officials. Ali Sardar Jafri was the first major speaker. He began: '*Mera naam hai Ali Sardar Jafri. Main hoon shair-i-inquilab/Main kahta hoon emergency Harf-i Haq hai*' (My name is Ali Sardar Jafri / I am the poet of the revolution / I say Emergency is the Word of Truth).

Harf-i-Haq means ultimate truth. I told Menon: 'I wish the earth would open and I would sink into it'. My boss overheard me and gave me a furious look. The Emergency, thus, began with a moment of great sham. No one was heroic enough to protest against Jafri's surrender. I did not stay to

hear the later effulgences of faith in Indira Gandhi. In the early years of Emergency you could walk out and not be arrested for it.

My description of the Emergency is a subjective one, based as it is on my experiences as an important Revenue official of the government. No doubt, my personal dislike of the Emergency will colour what I have to say in this highly personal record.

The initial months of the Emergency were not too bad. K R Ganesh, a communist leader of my college days was made the Minister of State for Finance. He wrote a passionate letter to the Commissioners of Income Tax all over India to declare war against black money. It was clear that Ganesh, despite joining Congress, had remained true to the leftist convictions of the Forties. I must admit that this letter inspired me. I forgot the Emergency and declared a kind of personal war on black money. So did many of my colleagues in Bombay though they may not admit this today. But at that time we were fired with real zeal. That is how historical processes work — they have many seemingly contradictory sides. Film maker Mrinal Sen wrote a veiled attack on the Emergency, recalling Mussolini's fascism which made 'trains run on time.' This became literally true in Howrah, Calcatta. Perhaps for the first time in its history, the trains did arrive in time and passengers could leave assisted by the local railway officials. Today I do not entirely agree with Sen. It is not merely a question of making trains run on time. The Income Tax officials in Bombay so zealously conducted raids — search and seizure operations against big real estate property people, that for the first time in history prices of apartments in Bombay

came down. TV was used extensively to terrorise these robber barons. I used to receive anguished calls from tax payers, including, ironically, some leftist writers who had unaccounted money.

Under various schemes voluntary declarations of black money were accepted. But here the dubious side of the Emergency became apparent. Taking advantage of the terror-stricken ambience, Congressmen like Rajni Patel began to make money. They made arrangements with Senior Commissioners to 'voluntarily' declare black money on terms advantageous to tax evaders. I do not blame some of my colleagues who went along with Patel. Probably most of them did not make money. They obeyed orders coming from Delhi.

Slowly the corrupt side of the Emergency, inevitable in the situation, began to appear. Ganesh had left the Finance Ministry which was now controlled by Indira Gandhi's insiders. I got into trouble with my boss at Delhi because I refused to follow the absurd concessions being given to the so called 'voluntary declarants' of income. I remember getting a furious call from my boss late at night. 'Do you think you are the only honest Commissioner in Bombay?', he shouted. My wife became alarmed at my facial expressions. That was the moment I thought of resigning but eventually took a less heroic though, I think, not a totally unethical course. I resorted to what is considered the bureaucracy's essential weakness — delay and red tapism. I will illustrate this by incidents which today seem more farcical than calculated.

There was an agent of Sanjay Gandhi who used to visit Bombay preceded by secret official calls to selected Commissioners instructing them not to eject him from their rooms.

'Let him enter your room, give him a cup of tea, and hear what he has to say'. That was the inoffensive 'message'.

This man became a joke amongst us. He was called the 'Cadillac Pimp' because he was reported to supply 'high-class girls' to top politicians at Delhi. My solitary encounter with him was both alarming and farcical. He deliberately spoke in Deccani which is the South Indian Urdu I spoke. '*Iqbalbhai, hum jaante hain aap progessive hain.* You have some traitors in your charge. Get hold of a legal point against them. *Hum unko ander kar denge*'. (We shall put them inside).

I was shocked to discover that he had people like M C Chagla, a retired Chief Justice of Bombay and former minister in mind. Personally I regard Chagla as one of the greatest Indians and have read with pleasure his book *Roses, in December*. More importantly, I had read all his income tax judgements at Bombay. He probably made large segments of the income tax laws. Now this Delhi contact man wanted me to send Chagla to jail because every evening Chagla was speaking against the Emergency alongwith one or two other heroic souls. I told the agent '*Yeh kaam itna assan nahin hain. Aap mujhe time deejiye*'. (This is not an easy task. I need time). The agent nodded in conspiratorial understanding.

I called for Chagla's file. I found to my horror that Chagla had omitted to declare the value of his silver crockery received as gifts at various farewell functions in his crowded life. They did not amount to more than two lakhs, but under the Wealth Tax law they had to be declared. His Income Tax lawyers discovered the omission and immediately filed a petition before me asking me to pardon the omission and tax the omitted 'wealth'. This I had the power to do under the

law. I immediately summoned the lawyers and passed an order allowing Chagla's petition. I got them to serve the order on Chagla the same day. This was one of my few radical acts against the Emergency. I know that many other officials took advantage of the Commissioner's discretionary powers to help anti-Emergency workers. Not a heroic step but certainly not to be treated with contempt.

I had never met Chagla. I told his lawyers to arrange the meeting so that I could pay my respects. His lawyers said: 'Please don't go in your car. The police note the numbers of all cars which visit Chagla's house'. So I went in one his lawyer's car and spent a memorable hour with him.This is one of my warm memories of the Emergency.

There is one aspect of the Emergency which has not been covered satisfactorily. This is the use of the TV by Indira Gandhi. TV as an instrument of power was impressively used the first time in post Independence India and it set the pattern for its more subtle use today.

I was compelled to watch Emergency TV night after night. Shankar Menon, and Uma da Cunha, internationally known PR persons had arranged for me to write a weekly column on TV programmes for a Bombay paper.

One could write a history of the Emergency from its TV. The Emergency TV films must be available in some archives or the other of the Information and Broadcasting Ministry. It is imperative both for scholars and from the historical point of view to carry out research into this material. My first impression of the Emergency TV was the surprising subtlety shown by Indira Gandhi as compared to its crude use later by Rajiv Gandhi. She used it selectively to great effect. For

example, the opposition in the Delhi Muslim quarters to Sanjay Gandhi's resettlement was satirised and condemned in a most subtle manner. The morning after the Turkman Gate incident, Indira Gandhi declared at a meeting that 'those who oppose national development would be crushed'. One could not understand the passion in her words unless one knew what had happened the previous day. News of the Turkman Gate percolated in to India by word of mouth. No paper dared to print the atrocities visited on Delhi Muslims. L K Advani was right when after the Emergency he said, 'The press did not bend; it crawled'.

Of course, the crowning glory was the downfall of Rajni Patel, the Bombay Congress leader, engineered by Indira Gandhi herself. One saw the whole denouement played out on TV. At a meeting Indira Gandhi declared, 'Mr Rajni Patel will be the first to concede that he is a controversial person'. The camera then shifted to Rajni Patel's shocked face. It was the moment of doom for him. He had made a lot of money as Indira Gandhi's man by threatening income tax raids. His problem was that he did not pass on a major portion of the money to the party coffers. Indira Gandhi came to know of this and got rid of him publicly on TV. One of the moral tales of the Emergency was the fate of Rajni Patel who in the Forties started off as a red hot communist and gradually became an opportunist. He was a power to be reckoned with in Bombay from the Sixties till the Eighties. His affairs with Meena Kumari, the film star, and other celebrity women was the talk of the town. He lived in great style and was proud of it. When he was a power in the Congress, he invited the Bombay Commissioners of Income Tax to his house for din-

ner. Frankly, I felt nothing but contempt for him, though once I had practically worshipped him. In his house, however, I had to make conversation. I complimented him on the choice of whisky. 'Iqbal', he said, 'in my house you get the best of everything'.

When he wanted funds for constructing what is presently the Nehru Complex in Worli, the planetarium, and other buildings, he held public meetings to which he invited the top industrialists and officials. Once, the artist M F Husain was seated next to me. Patel seemed to know him very well and called him on to the platform. I was surprised at the artist's familiarity with power.

The Emergency had many sides to it. It was a triumph of fascism, no doubt, but it was a very Indian kind of fascism. It depended for its success on the voluntary subservience of the people. India in a way is too disorganised a place for fascism. A top industrialist offered the appropriate epitaph for the Emergency, 'Even Indira Gandhi cannot make fascism work in India'. Ironically, the jibe about making trains run on time lost its point in India and that is why Indira Gandhi failed.

The last year of the Emergency was a time of consternation and dismay at the top. Suddenly, every one became 'democratic'. Sanjay Gandhi began to interfere in administration to show that he was a merciful man. Sanjay and Maneka Gandhi began to summon top central government officials to question them about the working of their departments. Here I am afraid some members of the urban intelligentsia disgraced themselves. The officials could not resist the Emergency, but the same alibi did not apply to the urban intelligentsia who

openly cooperated with Sanjay and Maneka in their attempts to 'reform' administration.

Raj Thapar of *Seminar* has written of this period in her autobiography *All These Years* . When I reviewed that book for a Bombay paper, I invited one of Bombay's elite intellectuals (who was also a corporate executive) for lunch. This man had been 'discovered' by the Thapars in the Forties. The Thapars were close to the Nehru family but during the Emergency, they went over to the Opposition. Their 'discovery' did not follow suit. He knew which side his bread was buttered. The Thapars never forgave his act of betrayal. At lunch, this man wept for his lost friendship with the Thapars. But he did not admit he had been wrong. This aspect of the Emergency — the intellectual's love for power has not been examined in depth. It remains one of the sinister aspects of the Emergency. There was a film by Szabo called *Mephisto* in which he satirised the intellectuals' love for power and fame for which they overcame their dislike of fascism. There were many Mephistos in the Emergency who remain unrepentant today.

I remember newsreader Dolly Thakore's broad smile on TV — unbecoming of a TV announcer, but no one objected on that wonderful night — while announcing the triumph of the Janata Party in the 1977 election over Indira Gandhi. It was the moment of Indira Gandhi's fall and the resurrection of democracy. It was India's second day of Independence after August 15, 1947.

I am more interested in the cultural aspects of restoration of democracy. It was amusing how those who had benefited in some way or the other from the Emergency now shifted

sides and began to abuse Indira Gandhi. A senior editor who had been disgracefully silent during the Emergency now celebrated the 'dawn of Freedom' in the editor's page article. Perhaps this is usual in post-fascist periods. But it certainly needs a great deal of forebearance to forgive those who profited from the Emergency.

My position as Commissioner of Income Tax inevitably came under fire during the Emergency. One of the ironies of post Emergency India was that the black marketeers and tax evaders who had been kept under some measure of check during the Emergency joined the Janata Party and celebrated 'democracy'. They now clamoured for punishment of those officers who had been strict in the performance of their duties during the Emergency. The government did not find anything administratively wrong with what I had done in Bombay during 1975-77. But the Jan Sanghi clamour was nevertheless there. So I was transferred to Calcutta on the ground that I had never served in that important metro.

I went reluctanly. But my Calcutta stay 1977-79 remains one of the most important periods (though it came late) in my life. I remember when I left for Calcutta I had a column in the Bombay monthly magazine, *Debonair* edited by Vinod Mehta with Anil Dharkar as Assistant Editor. Some people called it India's *Playboy*. But this was grossly incorrect. *Debonair* had its own intellectual flavour. People like Farrukh Dhondy, presently chief of UK's Channel 4, and poet Nissim Ezekiel wrote for it. I had a film column. When I went to Calcutta, Vinod changed it to a column styled rather pretentiously 'Calcutta Culture'. Pretentions or not, this column enabled me to meet and make friends with people like Satyajit

Ray, Utpal Dutt, Mrinal Sen and others. For me, Calcutta became a Brecht City, home of Indological and cultural elites. Despite the obvious misery, Calcutta remains for me *the city* in India.

My meeting with Satyajit Ray whom I shall call Manekda, a privilege conferred on me by Ray himself, took place in peculiar circumstances. Vinod wanted me to do an interview with him on his first major Hindi film *Shatranj Ke Khiladi*. I called him and requested an interview. I remember his response, 'Iqbal Masud? Now that's a familiar name'. The interview was later published in *Debonair*. I had arranged the interview through a friend and was supposed to meet Manekda one evening. Unfortunately, the Finance Minister chose to visit Calcutta the same evening. My Income Tax colleagues had arranged a dinner for him on my behalf at the Calcutta Club. I was trapped between official and cultural duty. I sat down and wrote a detailed questionnaire and sent it to Manekda fully expecting a refusal and a reprimand. To my great and delighted surprise I received written answers to my questions.

Manekda became a close friend because his apartment was very close to my official residence in South Calcutta. One of my great moments was to watch him shoot his film *Hirak Rajar Deshe*. Manekda was an absolute Master during shootings. He was directing Utpal Dutt, one of the great actors and rebels of our time. But Utpal was an obedient soldier when it came to Manekda's films. It was one of those hot Calcutta afternoons. Power went off for two hours. Manekda and his fellow artistes sat throughout the stifling afternoon and when power came on, Manekda resumed

shooting as if nothing had happened. At the end of the shooting he declared 'cut and print'. It was not mere film shooting. It was a masterly show by a director as Commander.

One more encounter with Manekda needs to be recorded, After my interview with Manekda on *Shatranj Ke Khiladi*, Manekda began reading my *Debonair* column 'Calcutta Culture'. So when I had to review his just released film *Joi Baba Felunath*, I saw the film with three different Bengali friends to get as correct a translation of the dialogue as possible. When the review was published I got a call from Manekda. He asked only one question, 'When did you learn Bengali?' It is one of the highest compliments I have received in my life.

When I went to Calcutta I was asked by the well-known editor, Gulshan Ewing, to do an interview with Utpal for her magazine. I had not known Utpal before but admired his work in Hindi comedy films like *Gol Mal*. I managed to contact a young actor working in his troupe. I think his first play I saw was *Duswapner Nagri* (Nightmare City). Now, Bengal theatre is perhaps the best in India and Utpal Dutt's is only one of the top groups. But I was overpowered by the *Nightmare City*. It was a thinly veiled attack on the Emergency. But what impressed me more was the general spectacle, the multi-dimensionality of the play. I then saw his other plays *Titumire* being a notable one amongst them. I now regard Utpal as much a Bengal Renaissance man as Manekda. I later became his friend and heard him at seminars. He was a leftist of the Forties vintage and his knowledge like that of the best leftists of that age was encyclopaedic. He was one of the last great intellectuals of the Left in India.

To proceed from Manekda and Utpal to film director Mrinal Sen is to travel to a very different territory. Mrinal too was a man of the Forties, But he was not a Renaissance's man. Why? I cannot explain in detail. But he lacked the easy grace of superior knowledge which Manekda and Utpal possessed. However, he had virtues of a different sort. He belonged mentally to the post-'47 world. He had a mind with verve and he was an opportunist in the best sense of the word. He grasped what was interesting in current history and seized upon it to make a film. Of course it led to some absurd sequences in one of his late films *Parshuram*. Manekda ruthlessly spotted these blunders and laughed at them both in print and in conversation. I shall give one instance. Sometime after my return to Bombay in 1979, Manekda came to Bombay and called me. With great hesitation, I invited him for dinner. To my great surprise and also embarrassment he accepted. The problem now was to select guests. I invited Benegal, Anil Dharkar, Govind Nihalani and some others. At the party, not knowing Manekda's slightly sadistic temperament, I recommended Mrinal Sen's current film *Ekdin Pratidin*. Benegal agreed. When Manekda went back to Calcutta, he wrote his first reprimands to me. In effect, he said: 'After British film critic Derek Malcolm had disgraced himself by admiring a South Indian *masala* film, I had developed faith in you as a critic. Now you too have let me down. How could you admire Sen's film?' Then Ray launched into one of the most destructive pieces of film criticism I have ever read. He said, 'Audience in Calcutta theatres laughed at the film and voted against it by walking out. I think in future I will trust them rather than critics'.

Manekda wrote to me usually in hand. This letter was typed. Therefore I feared it would appear in his next book. So I sent a lengthy typewritten reply. But the damage was done. Manekda made the same point to other critics and cinema people in Calcutta. Mrinal Sen was deeply hurt. I think Manekda was substantially right in his criticism of the film — that it lacked a real narrative base, that its message was superficial and contradictory. But Mrinal Sen in his better films went beyond such contradictions and was original in his fashion. I refer to films like *Bhuvan Shome* (1970) and *Oka Oorie Katha* (1978). Manekda knew this but something in his nature which I have called a sadistic streak, prevented him from giving Mrinal his due. Mrinal as a person was attractive and engaging. He would say things like, 'I am a leftist who wants to take advantage of the benefits of capitalism'. He became too superficial and clever-clever in his Eighties films. All the same I include him in my personal list of Bengal's cinema greats - Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak, Mrinal Sen.

I left Calcutta late in 1979 following my transfer to Bombay. I should have been happy. I was going back to my flat at Churchgate, Bombay, to a settled way of life. But at Howrah station I felt miserable. I had learnt so much in the past two years, so late in life.

XI *The Fine Art of Film Criticism*

I returned to Bombay in 1979 left with two years service before retirement. I was posted to an important charge, did my work and obtained honourable retirement. This gave me ample time to pursue my long-time passion, film criticism. For me this is and was both a personal engagement and an ideological duty. Film criticism in India from the Sixties became an important part not only of media culture but of national culture. I shall recapitulate a little at the risk of repetition.

Film criticism must be distinguished from 'film journalism' (which includes writing about films making, gossip about stars and so on). At the same time it cannot be denied that film criticism is part of film journalism. This basic interlinking between the two has created and will continue to create problems for film criticism in India. It is very important to keep this in mind when you talk or think about film criticism.

Film journalism in India is probably as old as the 'talkies', which means it began as a recognised field in the late Thirties. In the Forties, Baburao Patel's film journalism embodied in various magazines dominated the scene. The phenomenon of

Baburao Patel continued well into the late Fifties and early Sixties. His reviews of Hindi films made in Bombay were a mix of filmic assessment and thinly disguised aggression. He made enough money from these tactics to build a magnificent house in Bombay which got him into income tax trouble. The ambiguous relationship between film journalism/criticism and the film industry was aptly demonstrated in the case of Baburao Patel. Elements of the 'Patel syndrome' have continued to this day. To put it crudely, film journalism from the beginning was an instrument of power. The film industry in India — part speculation, part glamour — seems to have been built as a target for media aggression. Film criticism, as a consequence became an instrument of aggression. A film, journalist/critic once wrote (I quote from memory), 'When film criticism becomes part of the celebrity world, it becomes a nightclub act.'. Film journalists/critics have been prone to nightclub acts. Baburao Patel's long career was just that.

For this reason, film journalism has always lacked a degree of legitimacy. There have been, no doubt good film critics from the Forties onwards, people like Chidanand Dasgupta, Amita Malik and others. Satyajit Ray himself was a film critic from the beginning of his career and some of the best critical writing in India has been done by him. But the general thrust of film journalism/criticism extended far beyond these people. Baburao Patel's magazines in Bombay and later other film magazines set the tone. R K Karanjia was another big name in film journalism. Karanjia was of course a very different man from Patel. A brilliant journalist, he made film journalism/criticism legitimate. But even he was certainly affected by

the drive for power and became a key player in the game.

As a result, film criticism/journalism has been given a lowly place in the media. Even then it was not treated as 'serious' journalism. Editors would send the most inexperienced journalists to review films. This happens even today. Reviews of recent films like Shyam Benegal's *Making of the Mahatma* and Gulzar's *Maachis* surprised one by their crassness.

There has always been a division in Indian cinema between what is termed as 'commercial' or popular cinema and 'art cinema'. Actually the latter is not a happy description. In my view, films like *Aurat*, *Aadmi*, *Awara*, *Pyasa* and *Shri 420* would also qualify as art cinema which I interpret to mean 'cinema as cinema'. Of course, there was the Bengal cinema of Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen which is in a category by itself. But even these film makers made films or were involved in films which could be described as popular cinema. So the distinction between commercial and art cinema has never been very clear with the result the classics of the Forties and Fifties in Hindi cinema mentioned above, never got the critical attention they deserved.

The division between art and commercial cinema was further complicated by an important cultural event of the early Sixties. This was the founding of the Institute of Films and Television and the National Archives of India in Pune. I regard this event as important not only for cinema but for Indian culture as a whole. For the first time a major art of the twentieth century — cinema, came to be studied seriously in India. The Film Institute produced important film makers like Adoor Gopalakrishnan, Mani Kaul, Ketan Mehta, Saeed Mirza and others. The films of these people — good,

bad or indifferent introduced a new element into Indian culture, the movement known as New Cinema.

It is not possible here to describe the various elements of New Cinema. Many critics (including this writer) have done so already during the Eighties and Nineties. However, to explain briefly these were the following : firstly, a consciousness of cinema as a global art form with masters ranging from Europe to Russia to Japan. Secondly, the classics of American cinema did not influence New Cinema as much as the cinemas of countries mentioned above did. Thirdly, among the big names that influenced New Cinema are Sergei Eisenstien, F W Murnau, Dziga Vertov, Renoir, Resnais, Ozu, Godard, Dreyer, Antonioni, Bresson, Visconti.

The use of long takes, reflective framing and camera work, 'natural' dialogues were obvious elements as well as a refusal to surrender to the song and dance technique.

The birth of New Cinema must be seen in the context of the condition of commercial cinema. The golden age of the Indian commercial cinema was the Forties/Fifties. After which commercial cinema gradually began to lose its inventiveness and individuality. It increasingly became a standard product of, so to speak, drama and action. No doubt Hrishikesh Mukherji and others revived commercial cinema at the end of the Sixites with films like *Annapurna* and *Anand*. Still the great heights reached by of *Pyasa* and *Shri 420* were never attained again. It was time for an alternate cinema.

When I came back in the early Seventies from my sojourn in the Middle East, I received the full blast of the originality and newness of New Cinema. One saw Adoor Gopalakrishnan's *Swayamvaram* and asked oneself 'Are they

making films really like this in India?' By this time a debate had already began on New Cinema. Certain features of film criticism with which people were to become familiar later had already appeared. Pro and anti lobbies developed. I soon discovered that there was a lot of role playing in these discussions. Critics wanted to be noticed as much as film makers. This had happened in other countries like Poland, in fact it was satirised by one of the masters of cinema, Kieslowski. In one of his films, *Camera Buff*, Kieslowski showed vividly the struggle for power going on as much in art cinema as in the 'other' cinema.

I shall elaborate on some of the ironies of New Cinema. Mani Kaul was 'made' a controversial figure. In fact, I think he helped in the process. I loved his film *Uski Roti*, a sensual, erotic film with a very thin narrative base. But later Mani Kaul and his group (Kumar Shahani and others) became self-indulgent. Their New Cinema deliberately chose the path of a special kind of non-narration and a high degree of illusion.

Mani Kaul was quite a likeable person actually. I met him for the first time in *Montage* — a TV programme I recall with affection. I cannot imagine a TV producer today making that kind of a programme. *Montage* producers, Mohan and Annette Gonsalves expressed and exhibited a sincere love of cinema and a passion for discussion. I found Mani Kaul an articulate participant, and a friendship developed between us. It was, I think, a passion to be 'different' that was the undoing of Kaul.

From TV, I graduated to writing. My first foray into the field of cinema critiques began in the early Seventies for the Sunday edition of *Free Press* edited by M J Akbar. In 1974,

I covered the International Film Festival held at Bombay and wrote a light–hearted article entitled 'How I survived the festival and learnt to love films' Anil Dharkar the Assistant Editor of *Debonair* read it and called me the next day. Vinod Mehta was the Editor, but it was Anil who, so to speak, first 'discovered' me. I began to write a monthly film column for *Debonair*. Partly serious and partly funny, it contained literary references that were crucial to and arose from European films which crisscrossed literature.

When I returned to Bombay in 1979, I was appointed the film critic for *Indian Express*. This, of course, entailed a very different kind of writing as compared to *Debonair. The Express* column discussed art and commercial films released during that week — a veritable 'salt mine of film criticism'. In my reviews, besides everyday reviewing I made an attempt at serious analysis of films. Now, this poses a dilemma for any film critic writing on popular cinema. Anil Dharkar was not too happy with this kind of reviewing. He told me, 'This is not what I expected after your *Debonair* days'. I had to defend myself and came up with a pat and rather superficial reply. 'I now write for the Man in Matunga'. 'Oh, damn the Man in Matunga', said Anil. This phrase 'Man in Matunga' so casually summoned up became a item of controversy when I used it in an article in the *Sunday Observer*. The concept alongwith my article was attacked by journalists like Dhiren Bhagat. N V K Murthy of the Nehru Centre phoned me and said, 'Come on, admit it. You have not even visited Matunga's. Though Murthy was right, Matunga for me symbolised the urban middle class which is 'Indian' in a basic traditional sense but aspires at the same time for a different kind of experience,

whether it be Ingmar Bergman or Michael Jackson.

My career as a film critic involved criticism of art cinema and of popular cinema. This division was really an artificial one because in actuality I was functioning as a critic for both genres simultaneously in my Sunday column in the *Indian Express* from 1979. In 1981, Dina Vakil, Editor of Sunday Magazine, *Indian Express* gave me a fortnightly column in the called '*Personal Viewpoint*'. In this I occasionally elaborated on what I had written in the *Indian Express* 'regular' Sunday paper.

Let me illustrate what I mean. From 1979 to 1981 I was a Commissioner of Income Tax (Central Bombay). As part of my job, I was in charge of income tax assessments of companies belonging to the Birlas and Tatas and also of alleged mafia dons like Yusuf Patel and Haji Mastan. I had to find time for film reviews while dealing officially with these Titans. One Friday, the Union Minister was in my room in Bombay, when I got a desperate call from the *Indian Express* editor to send in my review of *Professor Pyarelal* immediately. I turned to the minister who was in full flow addressing my Income Tax officers, and said, 'Excuse me, sir, I have to send a confidential report. I am going to the adjoining room, please continue to address the officers'. Ministers in those days never dared to question bureaucrats on the nature of their confidential work. So I went to the next room and finished the review. Because of the pressure of circumstances, I remember that review perfectly. *Professor Pyarelal* starring Dharmendra and Hema Malini began with the two dancing along the Thames in London. This first shot gave me a perfect opening line for my review. I quoted Edmund Spenser: 'Sweet Thames,

flow swiftly till I end my song'. When I came back, the Minister asked me concernedly, 'Have you finished your confidential report?' 'Yes, Sir'.

Alongwith the commercial films, I also reviewed film maker Aravindan's *Esthappan*, a remarkable film about a painter in Kerala. Mystical and allegorical, it enraptured me and I wrote an ecstatic review.

The *Esthappan* review changed my fortunes as a film critic. On the strength of this review, I was selected by the local French Embassy and Alliance Francaise, alongwith Smita Patil, Adoor Gopalakrishnan and Girish Karnad for the Third World Film Festival at Nantes, France. This was my first trip abroad as a film critic.Though it came rather late in my life (I was fifty-seven), it marked the beginning of my fortunes as a serious critic. At Bombay airport, I was charmed by the celebrity attention our group received. On the plane, Adoor Gopalakrishnan attacked my review of *Esthappan*. He had never liked Aravindan, a fellow Keralite and the dislike was mutual. We argued about the film from Bombay to Paris. When we landed at Paris at five in the morning, there was no one to receive us. We had been given the address of a five star hotel. So we went there and began the hunt for our supposed hosts. I was asked to keep Smita company in the hotel coffee shop. This was my first close encounter with a star, but the great thing about Smita was that she never behaved like one. It did not mean she was easy to get on with. She was prickly, easily offended and yet it was always fun to be with her. We began by talking of Satyadev Dubey, the famous Hindi stage director, film actor and writer. I had called him the 'ageing *enfant terrible*', Smita asked me why

I thought so and my morning was made. I thanked heavens for my chaotic friendship with Dubey.

Girish Karnad managed to sort things out and we left for Nantes eventually. At the station, Smita carried my suitcase.

At Nantes, we were received by the festival's ebullient director Philippe Jalladieu. He told us there was a special South Indian category. The Festival, started with Adoor's *Swayamvaram* and kindled my long affair with film festivals.

A film festival engages your whole being — mental, emotional and physical. I threw myself into it explaining *Swayamvaram* in one theatre, a Benegal film in another. At that time Adoor was not very articulate at festivals, so Girish Karnad and I had to bear the public address brunt. Smita's beauty was a sensation and she looked terrific on French TV. She was the life and soul of the party. Many years later, when I revisited Nantes, an old lady asked 'Where is that flaming beauty with whom you came a few years ago?'

When we were at Nantes, Satyajit Ray was in Paris to make a film for French TV. Philippe came to know of this and forced me to talk to Ray and invite him over to Nantes. Ray was at first adamant in refusal, then suddenly surrendered. His stay with us at Nantes is a glorious memory. I remember a lunch at which he was present. I was asked by the *Le Monde* film critic when and how the Indian New Wave was born. 'In the theatre of Alliance Francaise, Bombay', I replied, more out of a desire to be quoted rather than to tell the whole truth. I remember the critic turning to Ray and asking 'Is Iqbal right?' Ray merely smiled.

Ray soon left. The Indian group was invited by the Nantes City Corporation to a formal welcome. As we walked to the

hall, the other members of the group were shocked to discover I wore no tie.

'But Iqbal,' Karnad said, 'We have selected you to introduce us to the Nantes public'.

I replied, 'You people are going up in life, therefore, you dress up. I am retiring next year, therefore, I dress down'.

That remark made Smita warm up towards me. 'You know Iqbal, you are quite mad. I like you'.

I visited the Nantes Film Festival later in the Eighties. This time I introduced the work of Amol Palekar and Ketan Mehta. But my most treasured memory is of the visit when I introduced Guru Dutt and Ritwik Ghatak not only to France, but to all of Europe.

By the late Sixties, Guru Dutt had been forgotten as far as serious criticism was concerned. Bikram Singh of *The Times of India* had panned *Pyasa* when it was released in the late Fifties. After his death in the early Sixties, Guru Dutt had become a 'non-figure' in Indian cinema. This attitude of regarding Dutt as a 'song and dance man' continues even today and serious film magazines like *Sight and Sound* treat him in this fashion. The credit for renewal of critical interest in Dutt must go to the Nantes Film Festival in 1982. Here, films of Guru Dutt and Ritwik Ghatak were screened, Uma Da Cunha travelled with the prints and I gave talks about the two film masters. In the event, I also had to translate the dialogue and the lyrics of Sahir Ludhianavi and Kaifi Azmi, the lyricists of *Pyasa* and *Kagaz Ke Phool*. The French translator, a brilliant young post graduate student of French and English literatures was horrified by the English translation of the lyrics brought by Uma. The opening lines of *Pyasa* — *'Yeh*

hanste hue phool yeh mehekta hua gulshan, Main doon to bhi kya doon tumhen ai shokh nazaro' — Urdu poetry in a highly Persianised style — had been rendered into nonsense by a literal translation and the girl refused to transmit this monstrosity to the audience in French. So we decided to do an improvised translation as we went along.

The French girl was a genius. The audience heard her in utter silence. Guru Dutt was reborn as a film maker in France that evening. At the next day's press conference, there was a barrage of questions about Sahir's poetry, in particular the famous '*Yeh takhton, yeh tajon, yeh mehlon ki duniya*'. As a result of all the publicity, Guru Dutt was shown later at bigger festivals in Paris. The French reaction has never ceased to amaze me. Guru Dutt had never had that effect in England. After some reflection, I attributed the French reaction to the existence of the lyric as part of French popular culture. One has to go back to Edith Piaf's songs in cafes in the Forties.

The 'discovery' of Guru Dutt in France led to his rediscovery in India. Pritish Nandy asked me to write a cover story for the *Illustrated Weekly*. When he got my article, he told me, 'I am going to town with it'. He did so with triumphant results. Guru Dutt became a cult figure in Indian cinema.

At this stage, I would like to set out the subsequent history of my relationship with Smita Patil, not from a personal or emotional angle, but to illustrate the delicate tension between the artist and the film critic. In the early Seventies, Smita Patil was regarded as part and parcel of art cinema. But I could see during our brief stay in Nantes and Paris that she was changing. She loved what we call today the consumerist culture. She would see people walking in the snow plugged

into walkmans and nudge me in cafes where we'd be sipping Irish coffee and say wistfully, 'Know how much that costs? A hundred pounds'. It was the wistfulness which struck me. I was not surprised at Smita Patil's walking into commercial cinema.

Today, many girls do that and no one minds. I must confess that in Smita's case, I did mind. I wrote harshly about her commercial performances, starting from the film *Tajurba*. Smita Patil read my review on the sets of Jabbar Patel's *Umbartha* in the presence of fellow actor Girish Karnad and wept. Karnad called me about this. Smita was one of the few friends I had in cinema but after this incident, we drifted apart. Some years later a busybody impressario called Sunil Doshi became friends with her. He proposed I write a biography of Smita Patil. I was sorely tempted. Then it struck me nobody had written about her 'discoverer', Shyam Benegal. So I told Doshi to get film critic Maithali Rao to write the book. I would contribute a no-holds barred interview of Smita Patil. Doshi carried the message to Smita and brought back a note. Today, I curse myself for not having preserved it. Smita had written she liked a short story of mine published in the *Illustrated Weekly* and then she went on to say, 'You are a very personal critic. I am sorry I am not diplomatic with you. I will learn diplomacy only when I am old'. She died within a few weeks of writing this note.

XII *Art and Popular Cinema : Masters and Players*

I was the film critic for Hindi films at the *Indian Express* from 1979 to 1993. This enabled me to watch week by week not only Bollywood film productions but also notable Indian films in other languages. There were also the annual film festivals. In this chapter, I shall give my brief assessments of selected directors and actors of both popular and art cinema.

I must make a few points at this stage. This list generally covers the period between 1979 to 1993, but it is not strictly confined to it. I did not start watching films in 1979. Nor did I stop watching film in 1993.

The terms 'Art' and 'Popular' cinema are used to indicate films made as artistic products using global standards of filmic quality and films made for the Indian mass market which employ a strong narrative line with song and dance sequences, respectively. 'Art' and 'Popular' cinema are not mutually exclusive terms. But certainly these two broad divisions are there in Indian cinema.

With the people of New Cinema, I shall give my brief assessments of selected directors at the risk of arbitrariness.

To begin with Adoor Gopalakrishnan, a director who explores Kerala history, delving deep into an analysis of its

social and psychological complexities. After *Swayamvaram* (1972), films like *Elippathayam* (1982) and *Mukhamukham* (1987) probe into the contradictions produced by the breakdown of Kerala's feudal order, and the rise of communism in a state where the Hindu joint family still exerted a strong force. His films are perhaps the deepest critiques of Marxism in India. His latest film, *Katha Purush* (1995) is a foray in a different direction of questioning the very roots of the narrative style itself. I have had the privilege of discussions in person and on phone with him prior to a review. I remember after the review of *Anantaram* (1989) appeared in the *Indian Express* Sunday Magazine, he rang me up at 6 a.m. to discuss it. Our discussion continued till 7.30 a.m. Adoor is perhaps the only director for whose films I have written my most considered reviews.

Mani Kaul, on the other hand has a sensuous-lyrical approach most attractively used in *Uski Roti* (1970), *Ashad Ka Ek Din* (1973) and *Duvidha* (1974). His documentary *Arrival*, a vivid portrayal of dehumanisation in cities was outstanding, but after *Dhrupad* (1984) and *Mati Manas* (1988), he veered into a very personal kind of illusory cinema into which I could not follow him. His rendering of Dostoevsky's *Idiot* was, frankly, so abstract as to be unacceptable. He is a genuine film artist but I am not too optimistic about his future.

To my mind Shyam Benegal remains the supreme middle class film maker of India. This is not meant as a negative comment. New Cinema film makers hunt so intensely for the extraordinary that the extraordinariness of the ordinary remains unexpressed. I don't say Benegal has succeeded in the latter difficult task, but *Ankur* (1974), *Aarohan* (1983) and

Suraj Ke Satwan Ghoda (1992) are remarkable films. His latest film *Making of the Mahatma* (1996) is a masterpiece. Benegal had excellent scripts in the latter two films. He also has a Ray-like mastery in the selection his cast and two of the greatest performances of 1996, indeed of the decade have been by Rajat Kapoor and Pallavi Joshi as Gandhi and Kasturba respectively in *Mahatma*.

Yet another director with whom I had personal discussions during and after the making of his films was Govind Nihalani. Nihalani grew up in Karachi during Partition. An instinctive fascination with violence has dominated his films so much, that to an extent it has adversely affected the intent and tone of his films. In *Aakrosh* (1982) and *Ardha Satya* (1984) he was in his element, exploring landlord-peasant-police violence. These remain classics of a certain type of art-popular cinema for Nihalani is one of the few who has fairly successfully '*married*' both genres. With *Party* (1985), a satire on middle-class intellectuals, he broke new ground with which, I do not think he has seen very successful. There was an experiment in the marketing of *Party* which is worth recalling. The film was premiered on television and Nihalani got me to introduce the film along with Shanta Gokhale. It was a good experiment, in keeping with the spirit of the TV age. Govind is one of the vital figures in Indian cinema, the precise direction of whose future is unpredictable. But everyone, including this writer, will watch that future.

Ketan Mehta was a director with whose film-making career I was closely associated with almost from the beginning. I adored *Bhavni Bhavai* (1980), a film about the struggle of the Harijans. At the Nantes Film Festival, I fought for its

merits and it received the Human Rights Award. I liked the iconoclastic *Holi* (1983) as well as the splendid *Mirch Masala* (1985) for which Satyajit Ray expressed admiration in a conversation with me. But with *Hero Hiralal* (1988) his decline began. He became both populist and superficial. Though he tried to get back to serious cinema in his version of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, *Maya Memsaheb* (1992), it was a laboured effort. Deepa Sahi who played the title role is a great actress, but she was not made to play 'Maya'. On the ideological front, Mehta became increasingly reactionary. At a party at Amit Khanna's house, he called Saeed Mirza's magnificent exploration of urban lower-middle-class Muslim life, *Saleem Langde Pe Mat Ro*, a communal film — an extraordinary judgement. His increasing involvement in what may be called Hindu Nationalism became apparent in his *Sardar* (1993), an apologia for Sardar Patel's anti-Nehruism.

Ideology by itself does not make good or bad directors. But now Ketan Mehta has joined the ABCL (Amitabh Bachchan Corporation Ltd.) bandwagon. Will he lift this deplorable organisation from the mess into which it has fallen? I think that is a task beyond even Ketan Mehta's prowess.

Saeed Mirza is perhaps the sole director who has remained faithful to the original radicalism of New Cinema. From *Arvind Desai* (1978) to *Naseem* (1995) he has remained on the Left–an intelligent Left–which looks at our society with a spirit of radicalism, combined with modern technique and idiom. He forced me to come to Bandra from South Bombay despite my illness to watch *Naseem*, an exploration of the BJP–created nightmare of 1992 which resulted in the

destruction of Babri Masjid on December 6 of that year. The terror is not shown directly, but through its psychological effect on a lower-middle-class Bombay Muslim family. It is a masterpiece of the Nineties.

Aravindan is the other Kerala film-maker besides Adoor. His early film *Thampu* (1979) was an individualistic exploration of circus life. His subsequent film *Esthappan* (1981) has been discussed earlier. Aravindan's other films do not reach this height though his last film *Vasthuhara* (1990), an account of Naxalism, is fascinating in its attempt to explain this movement. Aravindan's early death cut off a promising career.

One film I remember being impressed by was *Saze-e-Maut* (1987), a cartoon-like satire on law and order. It was one of Vidhu Vinod Chopra's first feature films. Chopra has an idiosyncratic thrust in his films. His film *Khamosh* (1986) was, as B D Garg points out in his *So Many Cinemas*, 'both a satire on popular cinema, and a suspense caper'. *Parinda* (1989) is a slickly-made gangster film about two brothers, one of whom is forced into a life of crime. The opening bars of *Parinda's* score which summon up Bombay as a city remain one of the most distinguished compositions in recent cinema. The film uses the metaphor of Paro-the 'lost girl' in the great Devidas myth to symbolize an intense but doomed love. Guru Dutt haunts Chopra as much as he does Mahesh Bhatt. I am not enthusiastic about Chopra's *1942 Love Story* which is neither based on fact, nor does it soar to imaginative fantasy. Chopra remains a powerful film maker who has the potential to create an outstanding film.

I reviewed Buddhadev Dasgupta's first film *Doorativa* for

Debonair. He is as much a celebrator of the metro as Ray with a modern sensibility. When his films journey to areas outside the city, they retain their power of working out a parable, as in *Bagh Bahadur* (1989).

Another distinguished post-Ray Calcutta film maker is Gautam Ghosh. His comprehension of the essence of conflict is striking in *Paar* (1984). In this film he scored a remarkable triumph in bringing out the best in Naseeruddin Shah and Shabana Azmi. Gunter Grass paid a tribute to it as a chairman of a film jury at a European Film Festival.

A great satiriser, one of India's best, Kundan Shah's debut feature *Jaane Bhi Do Yaaro* (1983) remains a masterpiece of riotous irony and satire. His TV serials *Yeh Jo Hai Zindagi*, *Nukkad* are important contributions to TV while his *Kabhi Haan Kabhi Na* (1993) is a distinguished but undeservedly ignored film.

Amol Palekar, a distinguished actor, makes it into my top directors with four excellent to memorable films. One was *Akriet* (1979) which is an exploration of rural superstition and consequent savagery. It is based on actual child-murders in a remote district of Maharashtra. This is not merely a social exploration but an investigation of individual psychology under the pressure of folk culture and history.

This second film, *Thodasa Roomani Ho Jayen* (1990) is a musical comedy based in a small town. The song and dance element has rarely been used so deliberately in an innovative comedy. The director extracts a marvellous performance from a top actor, Nana Patekar.

In *Bangarwadi* (1995), Palekar reaches total maturity as a director. This is a social and psychological examination of

happenings in the 1940s in a small princely state in Maharashtra. A teacher arrives in a village as a crusader. His attitudes crumble under the pressure of rural reality. But the essential idealism survives. This is a complex tale very subtly handled. Subtililty assumes a masterly form in *Dayra* (The Square Circle) where the life and mind of a transvestite in folk theatre of Maharashtra are explored. It is one of the most original films of the Nineties.

To turn to some of the New Cinema players I liked during my period of cinema reviewing during 1979-1993, a name that comes immediately to mind is Naseeruddin Shah.

I met Naseer only once at an Alliance Francaise party in the late Eighties, but I had reviewed almost every film of his during 1979-90 and commented in detail on his performances. He has said much against me without mentioning my name. By the time we met, he had 'gone over' to commercial cinema and had delivered a diatribe against New Cinema deploring the fourteen years he had spent with it. He particularly blamed the critics for creating the 'myth' of New Cinema. The critics responded in kind, charging him with biting the hands that had fed him. At the Alliance party, he said to me, 'We have not met before but we meet in absentia (*Ghaibana*) very frequently'. I had heard of his reputation as a blunt man, so I asked him, 'Is your opinion of the critics still the same?' He said, 'Yes, but your critique of my performance in Pestonji (1987) is engraved on my mind'. That is Naseer for you — a man who knows the inside out of acting and is not afraid to exhibit his knowledge. He is the best actor New Cinema and indeed Indian cinema produced during the Seventies - Eighties. He still remains the best. But for me his

high level performances are in *Sparsh* (1980), *Albert Pinto Ko Gussa Kyon Aata Hai* (1980), *Ardha Satya* (1982), *Mohan Joshi Haazir Ho* (1883), *Paar* (1984), *Mirch Masala* (1985), *Vishwatma* (1982), *Sir* (1983).

If Naseer is the 'complete actor', then Shabana Azmi is the 'complete actress'. I shall not waste space in detailing her achievements. All that is to be written about her has already been written and the rest is being pronounced by herself. When Smita was alive, people used to compare them. They are not comparable. Shabana was and is formidable. Smita had a disarming vulnerability. One admired Shabana and loved Smita.

Along with Naseer and Shabana, Om Puri completes the 'Great Triad' of New Cinema. *Ardha Satya* (1982) was his big picture, but he really came to life in Nihalani's *Tamas* (1987). His popular performances as in *Narasimha* (1990) are in no way any less than his non-commercial ones.

I spent a glorious fortnight with him in Russia in 1987-88, touring Moscow, Kiev (Ukraine), and Tbilisi (Georgia). I remember one potentially hair-raising incident, in particular. On the trip, we were accompanied by a young and charming Russian pair Peter and Elena, Elena was charm personified, but I gradually began to sense they were KGB agents reporting on our daily activities. I confided my suspicions to Om. Now, Om is a very straightforward, gullible guy who had fallen completely under the charm of the Russians. Next morning at breakfast, he said to them: 'Iqbal has a doubt about you both.....' I kicked him hard under the table and created a scene about omelette and toast being served to divert the attention of the party.

It was at the preview of one of his first films, N Chandra's *Ankush* (1986) that I encountered Nana Patekar. While the other actors swarmed around the press people, Nana stood aloof with a bitter, contemptuous smile. That was his attitude to film criticism and indeed, his attitude to the outside world in those days. He was outstanding in a film he directed himself *Prahar* and in Vinod Chopra's *Parinda* (1989). He also shone in light comedy films — Amol Palekar's *Thoda Sa Romani Ho Jaaye* and Aziz Mirza's *Raju Ban Gaya Gentleman*. He got the National Film Award for Best Actor for his performance in *Krantiveer* (1994). This has established him as a star. Now he has given up the role of a 'Marginal Man' and basks in the glory of being a celebrity. He has given another remarkable performance in *Khamoshi* (1996).

But the one actor who, I predict, will become the Naseer of the future is Rajat Kapoor. He has shown his talent in various films but he achieved classic status in Benegal's *Making of the Mahatma* (1996).

Pallavi Joshi is another young and promising actress, who rose to astonishing maturity in Benegal's *Making of the Mahatma*. Her performance as Kasturba is simply amazing. After watching the film, I asked her at a news conference, 'Do you really know the meaning of the many sentences you uttered to Kapoor as Gandhi?' She very honestly answered in the negative. In opinion, that predicts her greatness in the years to come.

Earlier, in 1983, Rohini Hattangadi had given a riveting performance as Kasturba in Attenborough's *Gandhi*.

Popular Cinema

As indicated earlier, I reviewed both art and popular cinema every week in the Sunday column of *Indian Express* from 1979-1993. At the risk of repetitiveness, I would like to add a few footnotes on the history of film criticism in India. Till the Sixties, it was an episodic, rather isolated affair. Besides Chidanand Dasgupta (Bengal), Amita Malik (Delhi), and Bikram Singh (Bombay), there were few other film reviewers. But film criticism had not developed in India in proportion to its substantial film production. The rise of New Cinema, the founding of the TV and Film Institute and the National Film Archives at Pune brought a charge to film criticism. From the early Seventies onwards, sustained film criticism began in Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta. At Bombay, the national dailies and some prominent weekly magazines began to carry detailed weekly criticism. Before I began to write for the *Express* in 1979, Bikram Singh and Khalid Mohammed of *The Times of India* had established a solid base of film criticism. For a decade, film criticism became an important part of journalistic culture. Kamal Amrohi, who had written the dialogue of *Pukar* in the late Thirties and made *Pakeeza* in early Seventies told me, 'I dread a good film review because that film will certainly be a flop in the market'. This remark may have had some truth till the Seventies. It ceased to be so after that. The time came when Amrohi himself looked forward to good reviews. Now that the age of Sunday film criticism has gone, it is appropriate to take a look back and try to record some of its achievements.

First of all, film criticism infused a sense of cinema as a

craft if not an art form in the reading public. I say this with conviction because of the feedback that the critics received not only through the mail, but while walking on the streets or at social gatherings. Even people who had not seen the films were inspired to do so. Secondly, the directors and the actors and ultimately the producers and the distributors began to pay attention to film reviews. I say this because of an occasional powerful reaction. Some years into my career as an *Indian Express* film critic, an important distributor sent a complaint to Mr J C Jain, then a senior finance officer in the *Express* establishment. According to him, I was single-handedly destroying the film industry. J C Jain who was, of course, the *masala* industry's man took up the matter with the Resident Editor of the *Express*. The latter, a good friend of mine, rang me up in embarrasment to convey Jain's protest. I had already received a copy of the letter from the distributor and invited him to my club for a meeting. Of course, the offer was not accepted. I took the complaint in my stride and ignored it. I mention this incident to illustrate the hazards of a critic's life. Similar incidents took place with my colleague's as well. But, we withstood such pressures, and a good critical tradition was established in Bombay. The disappearance of this tradition in mid-Nineties indicates the triumph of commercial cinema over objective criticism. To give an example, ABCL (Amitabh Bachchan Corporation Limited) tried its best to prevent publication of my adverse criticism of Mani Ratnam's *Bombay*, a film whose distribution was being handled by them.

What I also learnt in my years as a film critic was that most film directors and actors take adverse criticism in the right

spirit, and that basically, a film critic should express his opinion forthrightly without bias, for the public accepts the review as the work of an objective, independent mind. Having talked of New Cinema, I shall now give my list of the best directors and players of popular cinema.

In the late Sixties, filmstars like Dharmendra, Amitabh Bachchan and Rajesh Khanna excelled in films like *Anupama* (1966), *Satyakam* (1970), *Anand* (1971), *Guddi* (1977) all made by Hrishikesh Mukherjee. He was the director who put his stamp on these stars.

Like Hrishikesh Mukherjee, Prakash Mehra was instrumental in developing the talent of the superstars. *Zanjeer* (1974), *Muqaddar Ka Sikandar* (1978) gave a new life to Amitabh Bachchan. Though Mehra faded away later, the legend of Amitabh Bachchan as an 'angry young man' was created by him, Ramesh Sippy and Manmohan Desai. Ramesh Sippy used this image to great success in *Sholay* (1975). Amitabh emerged as not merely an 'angry' but as a self-parodic 'anti-hero'. This peculiar mix owed its flavour to dialogue writers' team of Salim-Javed. Sholay will remain a landmark in the history of commercial cinema. It was granted a 'U' certificate, thanks to the machinations of Indira Gandhi's Emergency rulers — particularly of the Information and Broadcasting Minister, V C Shukla. The film was so popular that children would recite entire dialogues even before the character opened his lips. The mock-heroism was summed up in the character of dacoit, Gabbar Singh, played by Amjad Khan. No other film till now has given rise to as many myths as *Sholay*. For that alone, Ramesh Sippy deserves a salute.

Yash Chopra was the romantic of the Seventies and Eighties cinema. Whether it was *Deewar* (1976), a story of the good-bad hero or *Silsila* (1981), the story of the real-life triangle of Amitabh's life, the mix was characteristically Yash Chopra's.

But the director credited by critics with understanding Amitabh best was Manmohan Desai. Films like *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977), *Naseeb* (1981) and *Coolie* (1983) perfected the image of Amitabh as joker, saviour, radical, upstart. Manmohan Desai's feat is unequalled in the history of Indian cinema. I once met Desai at a meet arranged by Bunny Reuben. I discovered that Desai's forte was an absolute lack of a sense of humour. When I joked that certain scenes in *Coolie*, a Muslim film, were seen with great respect by Muslim audiences, he said, I have also made a 'Hindu' film, and went on to describe a Bhakti scene in a subsequent film which sent Hindus into raptures. I must say I liked Desai. He had no pretensions and he paid little attention to the art-commerce debate. He remains one of the titans of modern commercial cinema.

A top director of the calibre of Manmohan Desai and Ramesh Sippy but much younger than them is Subhash Ghai. Trained at FTII, he represents a happy combination of art cinema quality and popular cinema professionalism. Both came to the fore in *Karz* (1981), *Hero* (1986), and *Karma* (1989). He pursued the *Mother India* theme in *Ram Lakhan* (1991) and *Khalnayak* (1993). *Khalnayak* is an interesting intellectual reversal. The Nineties 'Birju' (*Mother India*) is actually an establishment man brilliantly played by Sanjay Dutt. In the ambiguous atmosphere of the late Nineties,

Subhash Ghai remains an intriguing but positive figure.

Another popular cinema director of the Eighties with the calibre of the Seventies masters is Mani Ratnam. It is difficult to assess his technique briefly. But one notices an innovative intercutting which is perhaps unique in popular cinema. His best film is *Nayakan* (1989), a profile of a Tamil mafia hero in the hostile atmosphere of Bombay. The 'exile' has never been built up in such a realistic yet magnetic fashion. His later films betray a surrender to popular mood —*Roja* (1992) and *Bombay* (1994)— fables about South Indian heroism in Kashmir and a Hindu-Muslim love affair during the genocidal conflict in Bombay in December 1992. These are artful films. But *Dalapati* (1992), is a brilliant reworking of Karna's ambiguous and doomed role in the *Mahabharat*. If Mani Ratnam stops playing up to the popular mood, he can still produce masterpieces.

A director, who is a class apart, J D Dutta is one of those whose works can be enlisted both under art and commercial cinema. He has a peculiar haunted way of presentation, which puts his films *Gulami* (1985), *Yateem* (1988), *Hathyar* (1989) and his other films in a category by themselves.

Compiling my personal and 'arbitrary' list of actors/actresses from Seventies to mid-Nineties has been very difficult for me. There are too many claimants. In fact, looking back on this period, when I was assessing the work of these week after week, I am compelled to admit that this period is one of the richest in the history of Indian cinema as far as actors are concerned. I say 'compelled' because when I was on the job, I did not think so. The list, in my opinion excludes many brilliant performers. My apologies to them.

Amitabh Bachchan, Rajesh Khanna and Vinod Khanna are the three great actors of Hindi cinema. I doubt if any other period of Indian film history offers such an outstanding trio. It is needless to detail the achievements of these three.

Amitabh in *Anand* (1970) showed that he was the best actor among the three. But he lost this distinction when he began to compete for stardom with them.

Rajesh Khanna is the best melodramatic actor of this period. Though mostly overshadowed by Amitabh, he shone in *Anand* (1970) in a counterpoint role. Again in *Namak Haram* (1973), he did a rival role to Amitabh's with great distinction. He gradually fell into a pattern from the Eighties onwards but remained distinctive in his flair for conveying the romantic-heroic flavour.

Vinod Khanna, in contrast to the other two, can be described as the 'complete hero' with a perfect physique and an elan which lifted made his performances in *Amar Akbar Anthony* (1977) and *Qurbani* (1980) memorable. It remains a mystery to me why he did not surpass Amitabh and Rajesh Khanna. It was always a joy to watch him in his best films.

To mention among a few others whom it would be unforgivable to ignore is Dharmendra. One of the few actors outside the Great Trinity, who is of equal stature. The sheer range and length of his career is astonishing — from the role of a mild Hindi professor in *Anupama* (1966), he went on to the great triumph of *Sholay* (1975) and so on till early Nineties. His later performance in films like *Sultanat* (1986) became too violent, sometimes unbearably so. Still a combination of aggression and humour lifts him into top class.

Like Dharmendra, Sanjeev Kumar was one of the few stars

to shine outside the Great Trinity. Sanjeev had a special upper-middle-class touch. He performed brilliantly in *Seeta Aur Geeta* (1972) — a fine comedy, *Aandhi* (1975) — based on Indira Gandhi's life and *Mausam* (1975) — a *desi* Bergmanish film full of nostalgia and recall. There is also the brief but striking performance in *Sholay* (1975). No other actor could equal Sanjeev Kumar's remarkable talent.

Kamalahasan, a legendary performer, started acting in Tamil and Malayalam films but later transited to Hindi films in the great love comedy *Ek Duje Ke Liye* (1981) and in the Devdas type Hindi film *Sagar* (1985). His most memorable role was in Mani Ratnam's *Nayakan* (Tamil) (1987) in which he acted as an 'exile' Tamil mafia leader in Bombay. In my opinion, this is both Mani Ratnam's and Kamalahasan's best film though the actor has gone on to star in more sensational and populist films like *Hindustani* (1996).

An actor with a very idiosyncratic, melodramatic quality in his performances is Rajnikant. It would be needless to detail his film triumphs. But to Hindi audiences his brilliance was demonstrated in Mani Ratnam's *Dalapati* (1992), a re-working of the legendary Karna of the *Mahabharat*. Rajnikant plays out the Karna metaphor as the mafia leader of a small town who assumes its moral leadership. It is a subtly nuanced performance, which contrasts brilliantly with the overall melodramatic tone.

Sanjay Dutt's name has become so involved in extra-cinematic matters that his importance as an actor is almost forgotten. From his first appearances, Sanjay Dutt brought something new to cinema — a unique physicality with romantic overtones. His talent was insightfully exploited by

J P Dutta in two notable films *Yateem* (1988) and *Hathyar* (1989). These two films pose a tortured hero (Sanjay Dutt) caught up between sex and enforced violence. Sanjay would make my list for these two films alone. His performance in *Khalnayak* (1993) was extraordinary, clouded unfortunately by Sanjay's real life arrest in the Bombay bomb-blast case. Sanjay's performance in *Khalnayak* is a classic of cinema — brooding, mournful, crackling with wit and farce. When his real-life troubles are forgotten, critics will do justice to his more than remarkable performances.

The name I would select out of the three brilliant Khans, including Aamir and Salman, is Shahrukh because of his wider range. His films are so well known that it is unnecessary to go into details. I shall concentrate on the qualities he displays in those films. The most important one is a kind of schizophrenic display — now sombre, almost killer-like, now a song and dance maestro. Shahrukh is popular because in some elusive fashion he encapsulates the Nineties — frenetic and comical. To be crudely brief, he is the supreme post-modern artist of our times.

Anupam Kher's films, once again, are so well known as to render needless detailed treatment. His first appearance in Mahesh Bhatt's *Saaransh* (1984) blasted the way to success. He performed marvellously as the ageing father. Since then he has never looked back, transiting from tragic roles to comic ones with great success. The comedy is becoming rather crude but the intelligence remains.

If one forgets the outside screen stories, Rekha emerges as one of the top actresses of the Seventies. Her performances in *Do Anjane* (1976), *Muqaddar Ka Sikandar* (1978), *Judai*

(1980), *Khubsoorat* (1980), *Silsila* (1981), among other films entitle her to rank as one of our best actresses.

In the Seventies and Eighties, Sridevi became the post-modern actress. In fact, she was to that period what Shahrukh is to the Nineties. Light-hearted and self-parodic, she achieved her peak in films like *Mr India* (1987), *Chaalbaaz* (1989), *Chandni* (1989) and *Khuda Gawah* (1992).

I saw the preview of Madhuri Dixit's first film *Abodh* (1984) at the New Excelsior Preview Theatre, Bombay. After the show Madhuri stood on the third step of the staircase leading down. The PRO introduced me. Madhuri was an unknown college girl at that time. It was the first and last time I met her. I told her, 'Madhuri, you may not believe me but you will be a star'. It is one of my few predictions that has come triumphantly true. No need to repeat her filmography. From the beginning her indefinable charm has been her ally. Of course, the 'naughtiness' of film songs as in *Tezab* (1988) helped her. Her performance in *Khalnayak* (1993) came up to the level of Sanjay Dutt's self-mocking parody. Today she is a star, who has repeated herself too often and fallen into a groove. All the same, one of the truly greats of the Eighties and Nineties period.

XIII *Media Underworld*

When I retired as Commissioner of Income Tax, Bombay on June 30, 1981, my blood pressure dropped by twenty points. Normally, retirement is a time of depression, if not of mourning in a government official's house. I saw it happen when my grandfather and my father retired and in the case of scores of my seniors and colleagues and I was determined it should not happen to me. Two years before my retirement, the focus of my intellectual and emotional life shifted from government service to film criticism. Moreover, in the last decade of my official life, I had held important posts, which meant almost unbearable pressure, not so much of work but of extra legal duties and obligations. All that ended on the evening of the appointed day and next morning I took off to the swimming pool at the club, happy that all my future encounters and experiences would be in the media world.

Sixteen years later, I look back and asked myself: Was it a true liberation? Is the Fourth Estate morally a cut above the other three — bureaucracy, legislature (meaning politicians) and the judiciary. This question arises because the media stands in daily judgement over the other three Estates, picking up a scandal here, laughing at inefficiency there. But what about the media itself? Is it completely aboveboard? Are not

the weaknesses it discerns in the other three Estates present in its own structure? A remarkable development of the Seventies and Eighties all over the world is bureaucratisation of the media. However, there is no touch of the Judiciary in it. Against its injustice and immorality, there is no appeal nor is there a forum, as in the legislature or the bureaucracy, to set things right. The Press Council's powers are too limited. Therefore, a person who is unfair or unjust in the media world, in most cases gets away with it. That is my verdict on the media after sixteen years. It is a very necessary and vital part of society, but its claims to a higher moral status than the other three Estates are ill-founded.

For an ingenue like me, it was quite a shock at the beginning. Let me recount the first instance. In 1981, I was a Hindi-film critic for the *Indian Express* Sunday Magazine, Bombay, as well as a film critic for foreign films for the *Sunday Observer*. The Bombay Resident Editor of *Indian Express* at that time was Hiranmay Karlekar and the Magazine Editor was Dina Vakil. The Editor of *Sunday Observer* was Vinod Mehta. There had been a long strike at the *Indian Express* and both Karlekar and Vakil were tackling the problem of reviving the circulation. One way they found of doing this was to serve me notice that I should choose between the *Indian Express* and *Sunday Observer* columns. In other words, asking me to make a choice between the two papers. Frankly, I thought it was an absurd and unfair decision. *Sunday Observer* was a broadsheet and simply not in market competition with the *Indian Express*. Moreover, I wrote for different types of readers in the two papers. All this cut no ice with Karlekar or Vakil, 'It is either us or them', they said. With great

reluctance, I chose to stay with *Indian Express* because I valued my reviews of Indian films more than those of foreign films about which the best that could be said had already been said by foreign critics. But I had tremendously enjoyed reviewing both kinds of films. It was fun to deliver a kick to a Manmohan Desai film and another one to Bhowani Junction in the same week. I resented having to forego this pleasure. It hurt me all the more because I considered both the *Express* editors close and admirable friends. The admiration survives to this day but theirs was a prime example of an arbitrary decision with no possibility of appeal.

Dina Vakil more than made up for it later. She gave me the invaluable *Personal Viewpoint* column in the all India Sunday Express Magazine. Some of my best writing has gone into that column, and I am grateful to Dina for that.

The fortunes of this column also illuminate many media trends, both good and bad. After Dina Vakil left the *Indian Express*, the editorship of the Sunday Magazine was taken over by Nandini Mehta and Ranjana Sengupta. These two ladies gave my column a lot of prominence. They published it on Page 2 of the magazine, displayed it well and gave me a wordlength of 1200. This column continued on that page for a number of years.

Some of the pieces I enjoyed writing were on my Russian visit in 1988 and my earlier visit to Pakistan and to Punjab when militancy was rising in the mid-Eighties. This latter visit was at the invitation of the then Chief Minister, Sujit Singh Barnala. However, my column got into difficulties when BJP ideologues such as Arun Shourie and others took over the chief editorship of *Indian Express*, culminating with the

postmodern Hindu nationalism of Swapan Dasgupta. Things became difficult after Nandini Mehta left the paper. Pamela Philipose took over and informed me that my column had been shunted to another page to contend for space with lifestyle articles such as whether Amitabh Bachchan was really making a comeback or not. To be fair to her, Philipose did ask me whether I was interested in continuing the column in these conditions.

I had seen this development coming for a long time. After all, the Indian media basically favours the majoritarian discourse. This is not for any communal reasons, but because the urban English-reading public is majoritarian in thought, word and deed. This was made brutally clear during the December 6, 1992 to March 1993 genocidal holocaust. But as a 'social given' it was there all the time. I knew I had to contend with it. But I decided not to surrender. The majoritarians, when they decided to shift my column, were hoping that my 'sense of honour' would revolt against the humiliation but I refused to play along with the game. I told Philipose I would continue the column which was now reduced to 800 words. Finally the 'authorities' lost patience and told me they were discontinuing the column as they were revamping the magazine and making it a 'light read'. I noted with amusement that all the other writers of the old magazine continued to be on its pages, except myself. But I had fought a good fight from 1982 to 1996 and was proud of it.

A battle of a different kind was enjoined with *The Times of India* editor, Dilip Padgaonkar. Some years ago when Dilip became the editor of *The Times of India*, Girilal Jain had protested in an article that editors with 'municipal education'

were being ignored in favour of those with Oxbridge qualifications. I wrote a comment about this in the *Indian Post*, Bombay saying that I shared the 'municipal education' background of Girilal Jain but not his anti-minoritism which is another name for anti-Muslimism. Somehow this enraged Dilip Padgaonkar. He had arranged a debate in a Delhi five star hotel on 'Critics vs Creators in Cinema' at the time of the International Film Festival at Delhi. As I entered the hall, Bidyut Sarkar of *The Times of India* told me, 'Iqbal, Dilip is angry with you. So look out.' From the beginning it was clear that Dilip was out to humiliate me. He shook my hand in a very casual manner looking away. I thought this rather amusing. On the platform he did not invite me to speak, but he allowed his assistant Chandan Mitra, a resurgent Hindu nationalist to mount an attack on elitist critics meaning myself and Khalid Mohammed, *The Times of India* critic. I did not quite know what to do but was pushed by Khalid Mohammed into responding. I intruded into the debate without Dilip's permission. After a few minutes of my speech, Dilip said, 'There are eighteen other speakers.' I said, 'I am speaking for all of them.' Dilip was taken aback at being addressed in this manner. He had always regarded TOI editorship as being second in rank on Olympus. I was amused to note in the *The Times of India* photograph the next day that the shot was cut at Amita Malik who was seated next to me. This again was hilarious. A long-term consequence of that evening was that when Chandan Mitra became editor of *The Pioneer* in 1996, he very soon sacked me as a columnist from the Opinion column of the paper.

I do not wish to make too much of these incidents. But

they do indicate the hostility in the main media to dissenters, specially one like me who is a 'minority man'. Of course, these things are done in a very subtle manner. *The Pioneer* now plants an occasional article by Shahabuddin in its Opinion column. Swapan Dasgupta tolerates the fulminations of Mani Shankar Aiyar, who can be regarded as a pro-minority man. What both Chandan Mitra and Swapan Dasgupta are saying is, 'We did not kick out Iqbal Masud because he was a Muslim.' These are the days of conformism.

This division into secular and non-secular by the Indian media (I was initially cast into the latter category) was highlighted by the affair of Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (Viking 1989).

So much has appeared in the last decade about this affair that it has become difficult to disentangle the issues. A number of books have been written about it (for instance, Malise Ruthven's *A Satanic Affair*, 1990) and also innumerable articles both in popular and serious magazines all over the world. I played a role in the banning of the book in India (October 5, 1989). Mr Shahabuddin, former MP, Janata Dal, has been solely blamed for the ban and his statement that he had 'never read the book' has been bandied about to indicate Muslim fanaticism. This recital of facts is quite incorrect. The Muslim reaction to the book came after considered appraisal.

Late in 1989, *India Today* had carried a write-up about the book and an interview of Salman Rushdie by Madhu Jain. I read this article standing opposite Churchgate station, Bombay. I had picked up the magazine from a bookstall. Jain and Rushdie between them had quoted extensively from the novel. So a reader with an Islamic background could detect

any hint of blasphemy in the book. I had read the Quran and the commentaries thereon when I was young. Subsequently, I postgraduated in Islamic History. So I was able to grasp the nature of the book from Madhu Jain's article. The first indication of blasphemy was that Rushdie had used the word *Mahound* for Prophet Mohammed — a term used by medieval Christian theologians to mock at Islam. The very use of that word indicated the thrust of the novel. Reading Madhu Jain's article does not amount to a reading of the book, but it is a fairly good substitute if you are concerned with the narrow question whether it was a book likely to inflame the Muslims or not. A reading of the article in *India Today* evoked an emphatic 'Yes' as an answer.

Knowing the Muslim hostility to blasphemy, I was certain bloody riots would explode if the book was allowed to circulate in India. I knew that 200 copies of that book were going to land in the Strand Book Shop, Bombay. I rushed home and rang up A S Uraizi, Member of the Maharashtra Minorities Commission. He put me on to Professor Kulay of Maharashtra College, Bombay, a majority of whose students are Muslims.

Kulay's knowledge of the Quran was deep. We talked for hours to locate the origin of Rushdie's fictional characters. We found that Rushdie had done nothing less than a mechanical subversion of the Quran holding up Islam's most sacred figures and heroes to pornographic ridicule. Kulay sent a local 'crusader', Mehmood Shaikh to Delhi. The ban was announced a few days later. According to Uraizi, Shaikh had talked to Shahabuddin, Jaffer Sharif, and Salman Khurshid, prominent Muslim politicians. And that is the background of

the banning of *Satanic Verses*. It is wrong to say as Rushdie said then, and is probably saying now, that the book was banned without a consideration of its contents. A few weeks after the banning, I obtained a copy of the book and read its obscene chapter 'Jahiliya'. My opinion of the essentially blasphemous nature of book was fully confirmed. I later wrote in the papers a full account of the damage visited on Islam in this book. Some time later Mushirul Hasan, then PRO Chancellor of Jamia Millia, suggested that the ban should be lifted in the interest of freedom of expression. I attacked this in a statement published in a Bombay broadsheet. The editor of the paper, a local journalist, anxious to prove his secular credentials, attacked me in a subsequent article.

The controversy caused an upheaval in the Jamia which resulted in Hasan's physical expulsion from the University. The media, particularly the 'secular fundamentalists' pointed an accusing finger at me for being responsible for Hasan's expulsion. Now, it so happens that I have never met Hasan nor been to Jamia. My statement about him was made in response to a question by a journalist and yet even four years after of the event, the media continues to put me in the dock. I once asked Dhiren Bhagat, a brilliant young journalist, whose career was terminated by his tragic death in an accident, 'Dhiren, why do I evoke such strong reactions?'

'Because', he replied 'Iqbal Masud is good copy'.

Well, that is some comfort.

XIV *Bombay, December 6, 1992 to March 12, 1993: A Victim's Impression*

In the previous chapters, I described events in which I played some role or the other. However, in the Bombay riots of December 6, 1992 - March 12, 1993, I was not a participant, but a victim like millions of other Bombay citizens. In my case, there was the added stress of being a Muslim.

What started as stray instances of aggression towards the Muslims, escalated, by the second week of January 1993, into a genocide. For the purpose of historical record, the impressions of a victim are as important as those of the perpetrators (both Hindu and Muslims) of these riots. The idea of writing this chapter came to me as a result of two events: firstly, screening of Mani Ratnam's infamous pack of lies called *Bombay*, and secondly the growing tendency among sociologist and psychologists like Sudhir Kakkar of treating and placing Hindus and Muslims on the same level in the post-Babri Masjid destruction scenario.

The move towards the destruction of Babri Masjid had been fermenting for a long time. There had certainly been indiscretion on the part of Muslim leaders, but this did not

justify the destruction wreaked by the Vishwa Hindu Parishad aided and abetted as they were by Kalyan Singh's Government in Uttar Pardesh. It was with a sinking sense of desperation that I read the papers and saw on TV the horror that came to pass. The December 6, 1992 nightmare was repeatedly shown by the BBC in vivid detail. For a Muslim (of whatever ideology and belief), the event assumed the proportions of an irreversible tragedy. It was not so much the loss of a mosque as the atrocious ambience of triumph and glee accompanying the destruction that made the situation so horrific. It is difficult to recreate the ambience of doom today, so I will stick to the small details rather than describe the overall nightmarish scenario.

I sat watching TV alone in my apartment in South Bombay. The rest of the family had retired for the night, but unknown to me, Rizwan, our domestic help, a boy of about eight or nine, who had been practically adopted by my wife, was standing behind my chair. Rizwan was an emigrant from a Muslim village in Bihar. He had run away from home after his mother left his father and married someone else. He had not been taught anything in the local school. Teachers, he said, took money from the Government and did not run the school. The same happened back in the Thirties in the Andhra districts of Madras Province when my father was the District Education Officer. How little India had changed!

Rizwan knew nothing about the VHP, Kalyan Singh or their supporter and abetter, the former Prime Minister Narasimha Rao. All he had heard was the bold bare truth — that a mosque had been destroyed. So he stood behind me and saw the destruction in grief and dismay. As the joyous

crowds swarmed over the mosque he said in a stricken voice: '*Masjid ko gira diye, saheb*'. (They have demolished the mosque).

Rizwan's reaction was that of millions of Indian Muslims.

I began to receive frantic calls from Muslim friends in Central Bombay. 'Speak to this group. They want to attack Bombay's police stations in revenge', they would say. I spoke to them, 'What do you hope to gain? You will be shot down'. With a singular logic which ignored the facts of life, they said, 'The police did not stop them from destroying the mosque. Why should they stop us now?'

The inevitable happened. The misguided Muslim boys were shot down. The Mafia struck back in reaction on March 12. If Mani Ratnam and Sudhir Kakkar had been in Bombay at the time, they would have reacted differently than they did. Ratnam would not have made a third rate copy of *Chaudvi Ka Chand* or *Mere Mehboob* and placed it in the Nineties *Bombay*. Sudhir Kakkar would not have been able attained his lofty objectivity.

Somewhere in the middle of January, I told my wife, 'Of course, I do not expect to live beyond January 31. But I am not going to run away'. Jyoti Punwani, social activist and journalist, rang up some time in the second half of January and asked me : 'Are you still alive?' For that touch of black humour I forgive Punwani her 'pro-Satanic Verses' (Salman Rushdie) stand.

Despite the anti-Muslim fury, despite total negligence by Chief Minister Sudhakar Rao Naik and Defence Minister Sharad Pawar, we survived. Suddenly, it seemed that remaining alive was possible.

It is funny now to recall that feeling. It was not great relief at survival. It was a sense of wonderment that one could survive in the 'crevices in history'. I am quoting the Israeli leader Marshal Dayan. I do not admire him. But he uttered, as they say, 'a quotable quote'.

The bomb blasts on March 12, 1993 were disastrous for both Hindus and Muslims in Bombay. I thought I saw the huge Air India edifice go up in flames behind my house. Vinod Mehta, then editor of *The Pioneer*, called me from Delhi. He did not say, 'Are you still alive?' But that unspoken question was there in his voice. The fury of the conflict died away after March 12, 1993. Perhaps, both parties had reached the end of their respective tethers. No appropriate record of Bombay's disaster has appeared — whether analytical or imaginative. However, the tragedy is still there waiting for its Tolstoy or Dostoevsky or even a lesser figure like Robert Grave the writer of *Goodbye To All That* about the First World War.

XV *He is a Writer*

Tolstoy once said that the only worthwhile question to think about in life was death. One does not realise the truth of this in youth or middle age. In my late forties, I was in the UN service in Yemen. Travelling one night by car, I was hit by a bullet and rushed to the hospital in a critical condition. It took the doctors three days to save my life. Strangely enough, I was not frightened. I never for a moment assumed I was going to die.

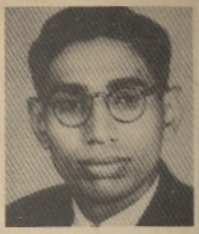
Things changed after I reached my seventies. In 1993 when I was seventy, I was rushed to Bombay Hospital for a heart problem. It happened this way. I was taking my usual fortnightly walk from the Cricket Club of India, Bombay to the clinic of Dr Chandalia about half a mile away. Dr Chandalia took the routine pulse and heart check. Suddenly his face grayed. 'Your pulse is abnormally low and your heart beat is irregular'. Things happened rapidly thereafter. My wife rushed me on Chandalia's instructions to Dr B K Goyal's clinic in the Bombay Hospital. Goyal made a brief examination and admitted me to a room in the hospital. Detailed checking of the heart and related organs began.

I felt fine however, and was impatient to get back to the initial preparations of the International Documentary Festival

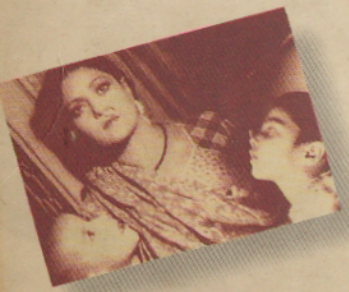
to be held in January 1994. Goyal uttered a firm 'no'. There were tortuous tests in various clinics in Bombay Hospital — tests which seemed to me like some special kind of purgatory. Finally Goyal said, 'We will have to install a pacemaker'. Now this happens to be one of the simplest of operations, but the hospital took a guarantee of non-responsibility if something happened to me during the operation. It was the first time in my life that I had signed such documents. It made me realize, finally, that I was growing old. I went to the operation with trepidation. In the theatre, I met the chief matron, Mrs Menezes, who happened to be the sister-in-law of fellow film critic, Ervell Menezes at the *Indian Express*. She held my hand during the operation. My wife waited outside the theatre. I was under anaesthesia, so I didn't feel a thing when the surgeon opened up my chest. The surgeon told Goyal, 'OK, get the pacemaker'. My wife had paid about Rs 40,000 to the manufacturers. The pacemaker was brought into the theatre and installed in my chest. Suddenly the surgeon said, 'Something is wrong. The pacemaker is not working. Should I extract it?' There was deathly silence in the room. I found Mrs Menezes had vanished. Did she flee because she couldn't bear to see me die? I said to myself, 'This is it old boy'. I began to recite the *Kalma*, a Muslim's *Mantra* of faith. Then I stopped. I said, I have been doing this all my life, why should I do it now simply because I am scared. I began reciting *Aubade*, Philip Larkin's confessional poem about age and death. I found I could complete the major passages in it. I muttered to my self, 'I am a better man than you were, Larkin'. The operation proceeded, I believe at Goyal's insistence. The pacemaker was duly installed.

The surgeon left the theatre. At the doorway he looked back and asked, 'Who's he?' There was some hesitation among the group of doctors. It didn't seem right to say 'Retired Commissioner of Income Tax'. Someone said, 'He is a writer'.

I could see the surgeon's face. It looked incredulous. A writer and so much fuss?



Films are Iqbal Masud's window to the world. From his childhood days when he escorted his burqa-clad mother to the talkies, to his days as an active film critic, films have been the axis around which Masud's life has revolved, providing that vital link between his orthodox Muslim background and the Hindu culture.



In these recollections, Masud brings an exciting vision to popular culture which for him is an illumination of contemporary indian reality. He is, as Vinod Mehta says in his Foreword, 'the only one who manages in a 700-word film review to combine Godard, Mrinal Sen, Indira Gandhi, Madhuri Dixit–beginning naturally, with a few lines from Auden.'

What also emerges is a riveting account of the turbulent times through which Masud has lived, times which while shaping the course of Indian history, shaped the destiny of Masud's life as well.

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